

Ya'akov (James) ~ Part 5

Consistency Between Faith and Conduct

Faith Without Works

2¹⁸ But someone will say that you have faith, and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!

But someone will say that you have faith, and I have actions. Ya'akov introduces an imaginary third party, "**someone**," coming to defend an imaginary "**you**" who answers "Yes" to the questions of v. 14 and believes that intellectual faith without good works can save him: ***someone will say that you*** are the one who has genuine ***faith, and*** that ***I, (Ya'akov), have*** only ***actions*** without faith and am trying to save myself by my works (which would indeed contradict Sha'ul at Ro 3:28). My answer to "**you**" (and indirectly to "**someone**") is: ***Show me this faith of yours without the actions!*** You won't be able to, since genuine faith is perceived not through talk, but through the deeds that issue from it. However, for my part, I, ***Ya'akov, will show you my faith by my actions,*** and you will have to conclude that I am not trying to save myself by my works; rather, my works grow out of my faith and prove that it is genuine faith.

Introducing imaginary adversaries is a recognized strategy in **Jewish Pedagogy** (Education) see practically anywhere in the **Talmud**. For an extended example in **Sha'ul's** writing, see Romans 10:14–11:11 and Romans 10:14–15.

19 You believe that "God is one"? (Deuteronomy 6:4) ***Good for you! The demons believe it too—the thought makes them shudder with fear!*** ***20 But, foolish fellow, do you want to be shown that such "faith" apart from actions is barren?***

You believe that "God is one"? Ya'akov's challenge to his imaginary adversary is: "You may affirm the ***Shema***, the central creedal statement of **Judaism**, recited twice daily by every observant Jew. ***Good for you!***—so what? ***The demons believe it too;*** for **Satan** and his minions are thoroughly familiar with Scripture and do not dispute its truth (see Mattityahu 4:1–11). However, such intellectual affirmation does not save faith, making ***them shudder with fear***. Unlike **Believers** joyfully anticipating their eternal glorification with **God**, they know that an irremediable and dreadful fate in hell awaits them at the **Last Judgment** (Revelation 20). Also, unlike human skeptics, they know that this hell, with its lake of fire and brimstone, is real and not merely a scare tactic used to frighten the gullible.

Examples of Obedient Faith

21 Wasn't Avraham avinu declared righteous because of actions when he offered up his son Yitz'chak on the altar? ***22 You see that his faith worked with his actions; by the actions the faith was made complete;*** ***23 and the passage of the Tanakh was fulfilled, which says, "Avraham had faith in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness."*** (Genesis 15:6) ***He was even called God's friend.*** (Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7)

The example of **Avraham** and his offer of **Yitz'chak** as a sacrifice (Gen 22:1–19) affirms **Ya'akov's** teachings about faith. What a biblical author means by **justified** depends on the context in which he uses it. For instance, **Sha'ul** (Romans 4:1–5; Galatians 3:6–14) argued that "***works of the law***" cannot make one "***justified***" because he wished to make clear that salvation is a gift given only through faith. **Avraham** believed **God**, and his trust in **God** was counted as righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Galatians 3:6). **Ya'akov focuses more on the role of good works** in proving faith genuine. **Avraham's** faith was proven genuine by his obedience to **God's** command. His faith made his good works possible.

²⁴ You see that a person is declared righteous because of actions and not because of faith alone. ²⁵ Likewise, wasn't Rachav the prostitute also declared righteous because of actions when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another route? ²⁶ Indeed, just as the body without a spirit is dead, so too faith without actions is dead.

Ya'akov's declaration that *actions and not because of faith alone* may seem to contradict Romans 3:28, but note that **Sha'ul** was writing about "works of the law," meaning the **Mosaic law**, whereas **Ya'akov** spoke only of "works," which have in view good deeds. **Ya'akov** continued to address the issue of misguided speech (2:16–18). The focus is on how errant teaching might adversely affect the congregation.

Practicing What Is Preached

³ ¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, since you know that we will be judged more severely. ² For we all stumble in many ways; if someone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man who can bridle his whole body.

In these two verses, **Ya'akov** continued addressing misguided speech (2:16–18). The focus is on how errant teaching might adversely affect the congregation.

³ If we put a bit into a horse's mouth to make it obey us, we control its whole body as well. ⁴ And think of a ship—although it is huge and is driven by strong winds, yet the pilot can steer it wherever he wants with just a small rudder. ⁵ So too the tongue is a tiny part of the body, yet it boasts great things. See how a little fire sets a whole forest ablaze!

Verses 3-12 can be taken in three ways:

1. as addressing topics related to teachers in the **Messianic** community,
2. as instruction generally applicable to all believers, or
3. as instruction applicable to both groups in some sense. In these verses, James addresses issues related to the dangers of speech. Teachers were particularly vulnerable to errors of speech.

Speech to Reflect Purity

⁶ Yes, the tongue is a fire, a world of wickedness. The tongue is so placed in our body that it defiles every part of it, setting ablaze the whole of our life; and it is set on fire by Gei-Hinnom itself. ⁷ For people have tamed and continue to tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures; ⁸ but the tongue no one can tame—it is an unstable and evil thing, full of death-dealing poison! ⁹ With it we bless Adonai, the Father; and with it we curse people, who were made in the image of God. (Genesis 1:26–27) ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing! Brothers, it isn't right for things to be this way. ¹¹ A spring doesn't send both fresh and bitter water from the same opening, does it? ¹² Can a fig tree yield olives, my brothers? or a grapevine, figs? Neither does salt water produce fresh. ¹

In our next post, we continue to dig into the **Letter of Ya'akov**.