

Faith and Works (James 2:14-18)

Homily for the 24th Sunday Year B

Introduction: The relationship between faith and works has been a central topic in Christian theology, often misunderstood or debated, especially regarding the role of good works in salvation. In **James 2:14-18**, we are told clearly that "faith without works is dead." For Catholics, this passage underscores the inseparability of faith and works in the Christian life. This teaching is rooted not only in Scripture but also in the rich tradition of the Church, upheld by the Fathers of the Church and the reflections of many saints.

James 2:14-18 – Faith in Action

The passage from the Epistle of James reads:

"What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2:14-17)

James emphasizes that faith is not merely an intellectual belief but must be lived out in practical, loving actions. Without works, faith remains lifeless—a mere abstraction. He challenges the reader to see that a faith disconnected from works is not true faith, but something dead and ineffective.

Commentaries of the Church Fathers:

The Early Church Fathers provide valuable insight into this passage, showing that the teaching of James has always been consistent with the early Christian understanding.

1. St. Augustine of Hippo writes:

"Faith without love is worthless, because even the devils believe and tremble (James 2:19). Therefore, it is necessary that faith be accompanied by love, which is demonstrated through good works."

For Augustine, true faith must be animated by charity (love), which manifests itself in good works. Faith that exists without love is incomplete and cannot lead to salvation.

2. St. John Chrysostom explains:

"If faith does not have works, how can it bear fruit? A tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and cast into the fire (Matt 7:19). In the same way, a person who does not live out their faith through works is spiritually dead."

Chrysostom highlights that works are the fruit of genuine faith, drawing from Christ's own teaching about the need for fruitful living in His followers.

3. St. Cyril of Alexandria further adds:

"Faith is the foundation of all virtues, but it must be made complete through action. Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so too faith without works cannot be called true life in Christ."

Cyril makes a direct parallel to the necessity of the soul for the body's life, emphasizing that faith and works must work together for a living and authentic relationship with Christ.

Biblical Evidence for Faith and Works:

Throughout the Bible, the unity of faith and works is repeatedly affirmed. Here are a few key examples:

1. Matthew 7:21 –

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

Jesus teaches that it is not enough to simply profess belief; doing the will of the Father, which includes acts of charity and obedience, is essential to entering the Kingdom.

2. Galatians 5:6 –

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

St. Paul reinforces the idea that true faith is active in love, highlighting the dynamic relationship between faith and works.

3. John 15:5 –

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Christ directly links abiding in Him (faith) with bearing fruit (works), emphasizing that a life rooted in faith will naturally produce good works.

Reflections of Saints:

1. St. Thomas Aquinas succinctly teaches:

"Grace perfects nature; faith, therefore, is perfected by works. Just as a bird needs two wings to fly, the soul needs both faith and works to reach its heavenly destination."

Aquinas uses this simple analogy to demonstrate that just as two wings are necessary for flight, so too are both faith and works necessary for salvation. One without the other is incomplete.

2. St. Teresa of Ávila emphasizes the role of love in action:

"It is love alone that gives worth to all things. If we truly love Christ, we cannot help but show it through our deeds. If we say we have faith, we must show it through works of love."

St. Teresa reminds us that faith expresses itself in love, and love, in turn, compels us to act in service to others.

3. St. Vincent de Paul lived this teaching in his ministry to the poor, stating:

"Faith has no meaning if it does not compel us to serve the poor. It is in the face of the suffering

that we meet Christ, and our faith is proven by our willingness to serve them." For Vincent, faith was something to be lived out, not just believed. His work with the poor was a direct response to his belief that faith must move beyond words into action.

Faith and Works as a Unified Whole

The Catholic teaching on faith and works is deeply biblical and grounded in both Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers. James 2:14-18 challenges us to examine the authenticity of our faith by asking if it bears the fruit of good works. Works are not something we add to faith as if they were extra; they are the natural outgrowth of a living faith in Christ.

As St. James teaches, true faith cannot be dead—it must come alive in our actions, just as the saints and Church Fathers have echoed throughout the centuries. The relationship between faith and works is not a contradiction but a harmony. Our salvation begins with grace, received through faith, but it is perfected and lived out through our good works, done in love for God and neighbor.

Thus, **faith and works together form the heart of Christian discipleship**, leading us ever closer to Christ and His Kingdom.