

# **JAMES: Faith Without Works Is Dead**

## Understanding the Epistle of James

### Lesson 2

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#### ***Introduction (Continued)***

“So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20).

Looking back to the first installment of our introduction, we saw that one can be truly saved and not manifest the life of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). As believers, Christ should be our role model for making life decisions on a daily basis. Unfortunately, some believers continue to live as unbelievers without learning God’s Word and following Christ as a role model. They lead lives of perpetual sin basing decisions on emotions of the moment which, if perpetuated, can result in a premature death, or *sin unto death*” (John 15:4-6; 1 Corinthians 11:30).

For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep (1 Corinthians 11:30).

The point is that we can hardly conclude whether one is saved or not based on one’s lifestyle. But, what about Matthew 7:20, “So then, you will know them by their fruits”? Good question! Lordship salvation uses this verse to defend its position which makes it so interesting and worthy of our attention. We hear it all the time - “You will know them by their fruits.”

Lordship proponents lift Matthew 7:20 *out of context*, and combine it with James 2:20b, “Faith without works is useless,” to form a heretical teaching. These proponents hold the position that unless there’s a manifestation of good works in the life of a believer the individual is not really saved. Using these two verses and others, as we shall see, is nothing but a desperate and futile effort to keep their position from sinking. But why the effort? Time and again, we tend to forget that the Church, is the Lord’s. Since the Lord is in possession of the Church, “He alone is responsible for its upkeep” (Ephesians 5:25-27). This important truth, should be held deep in the mind of every believer. By the same token, remember that my task in this work is two-fold. First, to expose the fallacy of false teaching; and second, under the mentorship of the Holy Spirit, lay a solid introductory foundation, and consequently, layer-by-layer accurately build the structural interpretation of James’ Epistle.

The inconsistencies in lordship salvation theology are disturbing. Many scholars agree with these inconsistencies. One of these scholars is Arnold Fruchtenbaum, who sternly disagrees with the Lordship position. He states that Lordship salvation “insists that good works inevitably accompany saving faith. Thus, in that sense, works are a condition of obtaining salvation; but neither Jacob/James nor any other biblical writer teaches this. The good works are a result of and not a cause or condition of salvation. Even so, not all believers will consistently build with gold, silver, and precious stones. Many will build, even primarily so, with wood, hay, and stubble. Yet, even those are said to be saved (I Corinthians 3:11-15).”

That’s not all! “Lordship salvation claims that while a true believer may fall into deep sin, because of its interpretation of *perseverance of the saints*, such a believer will eventually repent. While that was true with David, there is no evidence that Solomon ever repented for falling into idolatry. Solomon was, indeed, eternally saved; but he did not persevere to the end. Hence the term *eternal security* is much more fitting than the term *perseverance of the saints*. If perseverance is the issue, then it is better expressed as the perseverance of God, since it is God Who keeps the believer saved.”<sup>1</sup>

We saw in our previous study, that one can be saved and not manifest any good work. Case in point is the *Corinthian believers*. Let’s review Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians:

And I, brethren [a reference to those who are united with Christ], could not speak to you as to spiritual men [those who bear fruit in Christ], but as to men of flesh [lack of spiritual production], as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly [after about 18 months since their conversion, and face-to-face teaching by Paul, the greatest Apostle, there was yet no sign of fruit {Acts 18:11}]. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly [carnal], and are you not walking [living] like mere men [unbelievers]? ... Despite his rebuke, he added, “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field [no matter your status quo], God’s building ... you belong to Christ [no matter what]; and Christ belongs to God” (1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 9, 23; cf. 5:1-5).

The Apostle Paul voiced his frustration with the Corinthian church because of its lack of spiritual production. They were not living the spiritual life. They were hindering the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit in their life. That was after about **18 months** of his face-to-face expository Bible teaching! If Paul was a fruit-inspector, there was not one iota of *spiritual fruit* among the Corinthian believers that would have induced him to conclude that they were saved! But they were, as we have already noted! You may want to read all of 1 Corinthians.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 262

“So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). But what fruits? Is the fruit in question the outward manifestation of one’s life? Not according to the context as we shall see in a moment. Going back to the Old Testament, we know that Saul was saved by the virtue of his encounter with the Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 10:9-10). On the other hand, which of the fruit-inspectors in Saul’s day could, observing his life as a believer, come to the conclusion that he was saved? One may ask, “Did Saul not bear fruit?” Of course, he did, but what kind of fruit? Was it not the fruit of intense anger, hatred, jealousy and many attempts of premeditated murder against David that marked his life (1 Samuel 18:6-11)? Obviously the outward manifestation of Saul’s life was anything but pleasing to God, yet he was truly saved. But hold it - that’s not all!

So Saul died [the sin unto death] for the trespass he committed against the Lord **because of the word of the LORD which he did not keep**; and also because he asked counsel of a medium, making inquiry of it [and as a believer], did not inquire of the Lord. Therefore He [God] killed him, and turned the kingdom to David the son of Jesse (1 Chronicles 10:13-14).

We ask again, what is the meaning of “So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20)? To answer this question, let’s return to its context.

In Matthew, the Lord’s warning is sobering:

**Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.** You will know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-16a).

“Ravenous wolves” in sheep clothing - my friend, how can you recognize a wolf in sheep clothing? Can you, by observation, call him a wolf? Not at all! This is exactly the point the Lord seeks to make. (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:12-15). That is to say, that we cannot, by fruit-inspection, pin-point who is truly saved. Only the Lord knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19). To drive His point home, the Lord uses this illustration of false prophets:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then, I will declare them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS’ ” (Matthew 7:21-23).

We see the claims of the false prophets. Their claims were undeniably good deeds! They did spectacular works! But were they saved? No. The false prophets were not saved! BECAUSE depended on their good works at the expense of God’s grace offer which is eternal life appropriated by means of faith alone in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Did they fail to do the will of the Father? We ask, “What is the will of the Father for the unbelievers?” Scripture has the answer:

**For this is the will of My Father**, that everyone who beholds the Son and **believes in Him** [faith alone], may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day [guaranteed]” (John 6:40).

God’s will for an unsaved person is simply to trust in Christ alone ([Acts 16:31](#)).

The answer to the meaning of “So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20) is found in another passage. *Scripture interprets Scripture*. Here the Lord makes it so clear:

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good, or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. **You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart...for by your words you shall be justified.** (Matthew 12:33-34, 37a)

We see from the above verse that the “fruits” in Matthew 7:20 the are not actions but rather words.

In a nutshell, the issue is one’s **‘words’**, and not one’s outward manifestation. People may have convincing actions but eventually their words will reveal their true selves. We run into people all the time, who outwardly are sweet as pie and honey-comb, but inwardly are not regenerated. This hidden side often manifests itself when there’s a discussion (words) regarding Christ, the Savior. Now we ask, “Is it possible to differentiate a wolf in sheep’s clothing from a true sheep? ‘Of course it is! Can the differentiation be made outwardly, by his actions? Not hardly! Can you tell by his bark? Yes! You recognize the bleat of a sheep but when you hear that sheep bark - you know it is not a sheep at all - but rather a wolf.

I remember vividly a sad thing that happened to a young lady in a church where I was a member many years ago. A young man, though a ravenous wolf in sheep’s clothing, came in disguised as a true sheep of our Lord. However, his purpose was single minded - to marry this lady. He did everything to associate with the church. He participated in all church activities. Outwardly, he appeared to be one of us. He eventually married this lady and they went on a honey moon - and never came back!

Later, he admitted that he wasn’t interested in church, and he hadn’t made up his mind whether to trust in Christ or not for salvation. There you have it! A perfect example of Our Lord’s Word!

“So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). The fruits were the words which expressed his mental attitude. We see this man’s true motivation was eventually disclosed by his words rather than his actions, which were convincingly deceptive.

It is possible to be a fruitless believer, but it comes with a price. Compare the following verses from 2 Peter and Proverbs:

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. (2 Peter 1:5-9).

A man who wanders from the way of understanding Will rest in the assembly of the dead. (Proverbs 21:16)

The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, That one may avoid the snares of death. (Proverbs 14:27).

The fear of the LORD prolongs life, But the years of the wicked will be shortened (Proverbs 10:27).

Now that we have studied the meaning of good works and the importance of bearing fruit in the life of the believer, we are ready to examine the *real bone of contention in the entire epistle of James - namely FAITH*. This is where we shall resume when we meet again, God willing.

END LESSON 2

*All verses NASB unless otherwise specified.*

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