

Faith Without Works is Dead

February 4 • Bible Study Guide 10

Bible Background • JAMES 2:14–26

Printed Text • JAMES 2:14–26 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 143

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson we will: AGREE with the teachings of James regarding the relationship between faith and works; REPENT for those times when our words were not supported by corresponding actions; and REVERE God with actions that match our faith expressions.

In Focus

Today was the first day that Pastor Jackson would be introduced as the new pastor. He decided to test his new congregation to assess their spiritual growth.

He dressed as a homeless man and walked around the church. Only three people said hello. He asked for money to buy food. Everyone refused. The “homeless” man greeted others, but they returned cold, icy stares.

It was time for the announcement! As the congregation clapped with excitement, they scowled at the homeless man who was walking toward the front of the church. When he stood in the pulpit, he told them the Scripture lesson was from [Matthew 25:35](#).

Pastor Jackson told his congregation how he felt about what he’d just experienced. Some began to cry. Nearly everyone felt a sense of shame, especially Deacon Jones. The congregation couldn’t stop thinking about their lack of compassion and outreach. Homeless people were a common sight all around their parish, but they were ignored and neglected. So much religious busyness took priority.

Deacon Jones met with Pastor Jackson and launched a food pantry ministry. They didn’t have to work hard to sign up volunteers. Members in the entire church found a way to become personally involved.

In today’s lesson, we will learn what it means to have an authentic and genuine faith. In what ways has God called you to put your faith into action?

Keep in Mind

“Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” ([James 2:17](#)).

Words You Should Know

A. Faith ([James 2:14](#)) *pistis* (Gk.)—Persuasion, credence, moral conviction, truth itself, assurance, belief.

B. Works (v. 14) *ergon* (Gk.)—Toil as in an effort or occupation; act, deed, doing, labor.

Say It Correctly

Destitute. **DES**-te-toot.

Imputed. im-**PYUT**-ed.

Rahab. **RAY**-hab

KJV

James 2:14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

NLT

James 2:14 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?

15 Suppose you see a brother or sister, who has no food or clothing,

16 and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

17 So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

18 Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."

19 You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.

20 How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?

21 Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

22 You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete.

23 And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God.

24 So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

25 Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road.

26 Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.

The People, Places, and Times

Abraham. Abraham was the son of Terah. He was from Ur of the Chaldees in what is modern-day Iraq. God spoke to Abraham and called him to go to an unknown land, promising to bless him and make him into a great nation ([Genesis 12:1–4](#)). Abraham obeyed, demonstrating great faith in God. He is considered the father of faith ([Hebrews 11:8](#)) and the patriarch of three major world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam).

Rahab. Rahab was a prostitute who lived in Jericho. She was visited by two spies who were hiding from the Canaanite inhabitants of the city. In return for her protection, the two Israelite spies promised to spare her and her family during the city’s conquest ([Joshua 2:14](#)). She was to place a scarlet thread outside of her window to indicate her allegiance to Israel (v. 18). Rahab is in the lineage of Christ ([Matthew 1:5](#)) and mentioned in Hebrews 11 in the “Hall of Faith.”

Background

The book of James is one of the earliest letters. It was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, between AD 48 and 62. Tradition holds that James did not become a believer until he saw Christ after the Resurrection. James is now the leader of the church in Jerusalem during a time of major transition ([Acts 12:17, 15:13](#)). Severe persecution following the stoning of Stephen scattered Jewish Christians throughout the Mediterranean world. James wrote to encourage his fellow believers during this extremely difficult time.

At-A-Glance

1. Dead Works ([James 2:14–17](#))
2. Profession Without Possession (vv. 18–20)
3. The Body Without the Spirit (vv. 20–26)

In Depth

1. Dead Works ([James 2:14–17](#))

James explains that people can claim to have faith, but if they do not accompany their words by action, that faith is worth nothing. Even Jesus warned that only those who do the Father’s will would enter the kingdom of heaven, not those who say, “Lord, Lord!” ([Matthew 7:21](#)).

Similarly, James underscores the relationship between faith and works. Works, or being good and doing good deeds, cannot earn salvation; faith or believing in Jesus is the only way to eternal life ([Ephesians 2:8–9](#)). Once a person is saved—truly saved—change occurs and good works, or actions, result. The evidence of salvation is an obedient lifestyle conforming with God’s Word. James gives the example of a brother or sister who needs food and shelter in verses 15–16. He argued it is no good to say, “I’m praying that you’ll be warm and get something to eat!” and then walk away without providing what that brother or sister needs—it’s empty words. James uses a rhetorical question to underscore that a person who truly cares will do something to help.

Having faith is the heart of James’ practical letter. If a person shows no evidence of a changed lifestyle, James says that faith, no matter how loudly expressed, is dead and worthless ([James 2:17](#)). True faith always results in a transformed life. As the old folks used to sing, “The things I used to do, I don’t do no more.”

2. Profession Without Possession (vv. 18–20)

James shows the shallowness of profession without possession. He compares and contrasts a person who says they have faith but no works or evidence to a person who says that the evidence of their faith is demonstrated in their lifestyle.

In verse 19, the Lord’s brother shares insight about the demonic world. He says in essence, that it’s great that a person believes there is one God, but demons also believe that Jesus is who He says He is. And (to the shame of some so-called believers) at least the demons tremble at the very thought. But do demons believe to the extent of changing? Of course not! So what good is their belief?

James calls such thinking “foolish” in verse 20. He urges believers to examine themselves thoroughly and not be fooled about eternal life. Unfortunately, some Christians will miss heaven by 18 inches—the space between the head and the heart. Intellectual agreement with the Bible, knowing Scripture, going to church, singing in the choir, or serving on the deacon board is not enough. Heart transformation that produces a changed life is what matters.

3. The Body Without the Spirit (vv. 21–26)

James uses Abraham’s willingness to offer his son Isaac as another example of faith. Abraham had waited many years to have a son. In fact, he was one hundred years old and his wife, Sarah, was ninety ([Genesis 17:17](#)). But

God promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. Isaac was that promise fulfilled. Then God told Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering ([Genesis 22:2](#)). In the morning, Abraham got up, took Isaac, and headed up the mountain. He made an altar, placed his son on the altar, and lifted his hand to kill his son. God stopped him and instead provided a ram in the bush (22:13).

Why was Abraham so willing to obey God? He was convinced that God had a larger plan that he could not see, because God had promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations ([Genesis 17:5–6](#)). That’s faith in action.

Is Abraham too righteous to use as a comparison? How about Rahab? In verse 25, James swings the pendulum to the other extreme to demonstrate that a harlot demonstrated faith in action when she hid the spies ([Joshua 2:1](#)).

Without the spirit or breath, the body has no life. It is dead, writes James in summary (v. 26). So, too, is verbal assent—nice words like “Praise the Lord”—without the corresponding action of a changed life.

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is faith without works dead ([James 2:17](#))?
2. What is the role of works in relation to faith (v. 22)?

Discuss the Meaning

D.L. Moody said, “Every Bible should be bound in shoe leather.” True faith walks itself out in the believer’s daily life. How can we ensure that our faith affects our daily life?

Lesson in Our Society

Too many of us live undisciplined lives. [Romans 12:1–2](#) provides the formula for us to cultivate authentic faith. Because of all that God has done for us, we should willingly present Him our lives as a sacrificial offering. “Here I am, Lord. Make me the person You want me to be.”

Transformation, the process of changing from a caterpillar to a butterfly, will only result when our minds are renewed. Studying God’s Word—and applying what we learn in our daily lives—will produce the kind of faith James intends.

Make It Happen

- Do a self-evaluation. If someone accused you of being a Christian, is there enough evidence to convict you?
- Become part of a small-group Bible study so you will be accountable to others, and they will be accountable to you.
- Consider sponsoring a child through an organization such as Compassion International at www.compassion.com. Or encourage your church to start a foster care program (visit www.covenantsforkids.info).

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

James 2:14–26

14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?

It may be helpful to note that the literary construction of this part of the book of James is one of a proposition supported by arguments and then summarized with conclusions. The proposition opens with a pair of rhetorical questions, the first of which basically says, “Suppose a man says he has faith but not works.” This is quite different from James wording it, “Suppose a man has faith.” To actually have faith versus saying you have faith are two entirely different things. Today, the second rhetorical question would be worded, “This kind of faith—claimed faith without works—can’t save him, can it?” Of course, the correct answer is no, as James will demonstrate.

15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? 17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

The proposition continues with a hypothetical example, employing hyperbole with a “naked” (Gk. *gumnos*, **goom-NOCE**) brother or sister, indicating someone in dire straits or desperate need, rather than an actual complete lack of clothing. This is reinforced with the supporting phrase “destitute of daily food.” The word “destitute” (Gk. *leipo*, **LYE-po**) also means to lag or be left behind. This destitute brother or sister has been left behind in terms of financial provision and life’s necessities.

The common phrase “depart in peace” means, in essence, “Go get what you need somewhere else, from someone else—but know that I care,” or the popular “go and be filled.” More modern similar responses might be “God helps those who help themselves,” or the even colder, “You got yourself into this mess, so you can get yourself out of it.” Such words come from a faith that is dead (Gk. *nekros*, **neck-ROCE**), which is the plain sense of the word. James was not pulling punches.

“What doth it profit?” James asked. In other words, “What good is a dead faith?” A dead faith is devoid of corresponding actions. The actions do not save you, but they are evidence that the faith you possess is alive. Genuine faith is a gift from God ([Ephesians 2:8](#)), and works are a natural expression of such faith. Faith and works are two sides of the same coin.

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. **19** Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. **20** But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

Having stated his proposition with rhetorical and hypothetical questions that provoke an obvious answer, James next argues his case via a fictional debater. Person A has faith without deeds; Person B has faith with deeds. From Person A, James asked for evidence of the faith he claimed to possess, reminding him that even demons can make such claims. At the thought of God, demons would even “tremble” (Gk. *phrisso*, **FREE-so**), a word bringing to mind the idea of shuddering and one’s hair standing on end. However, for Person B, the evidence of faith speaks for itself—the deeds are the evidence.

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? 22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

It would be both normal and expected for any Jew talking about faith to mention Abraham. James explains that God called Abraham righteous because of his faith. Here, James revisits the familiar details of Abraham’s “works”—offering Isaac on the altar by faith—actively trusting God, even if it meant cooperating with God when it seemed to go against His own promise.

James was saying that Abraham’s obedient “work” was a tangible act of faith—putting Isaac on the altar and being willing to sacrifice even the son of promise at God’s command. God reckoned Abraham’s faith as righteous in the seemingly impossible covenant promise of countless generations born to an elderly couple ([Genesis 15:6](#)). He was justified (Gk. *dikaioo*, **dee-keye-OH-oh**), or declared to be righteous. Abraham had

faith, and God made a covenant with him because of it. Then Abraham proved his faith with the “work” of obeying God and being willing to sacrifice Isaac.

24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

Having made his proposition with questions, illustrations, an example, and having presented an argument from the Old Testament, James makes an early conclusion before making yet another argument from the Old Testament. This statement, which too many have pulled out of the context of his carefully constructed presentation, has caused problems and confusion through the centuries. Such approaches to interpreting Scripture are simply poor hermeneutics. Earlier, James made a parallel argument, which also must remain within the context of his epistle, regarding being a hearer of the Word versus being a doer (1:22–25).

25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?

James next appeals to an opposite type of character from the Old Testament for the second part of the argument section of his presentation. Some might feel like they cannot relate to the head of the Jewish nation, the national shining star, Abraham. However, perhaps an example from the opposite side of society would be closer to home or at least more relatable.

This unlikely pair shared both differences and similarities. One was Hebrew, the other Gentile; one was called by God, the other originally destined for destruction; one was a man, the other a woman; one was the father of faith, the other a lowly prostitute; one went through a long-term process of interacting with God and proving his faith; the other only had hearsay to guide her quick thinking.

For similarities, both were foreigners, both showed hospitality to strangers ([Genesis 18:1–5](#); [Joshua 2:1](#)), and both became ancestors of Jesus ([Matthew 1:2, 5](#)). Rahab took her place in history next to Abraham because she had faith in God and acted on her faith—a simple but profound lesson that is completely transcultural for all believers.

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

James puts the conclusion on his argument by stating a clear and evident illustration of his point. Faith with works constitutes a living faith. Absent of works, faith is a cold and lifeless body. It is not genuine faith. Works do not save, but they are evidence that faith is alive.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Fulfilling the Law

([James 2:8–13](#))

TUESDAY

The Royal Law

([Leviticus 19:13–18](#))

WEDNESDAY

Teach Me to Do Your Will

(Psalm 143)

THURSDAY

Justified by Faith

([Romans 3:21–31](#))

FRIDAY

Christ Lives in Me

([Galatians 2:15–21](#))

SATURDAY

Spirit Comes Through Faith, Not Law

([Galatians 3:6–14](#))

SUNDAY

Faith Without Works is Dead

([James 2:14–26](#))