

Faith Without Works Is Dead

Bible Background • JAMES 2:14–26

Printed Text • JAMES 2:14–26 | Devotional Reading • MATTHEW 18:23–35

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: COMPARE and contrast faith that is no more than empty talk with a faith that is proved by actions, REFLECT on the power of Abraham’s and Rahab’s examples of faith in action, and DECIDE to demonstrate faith with tangible works.

In Focus

Barnabas plopped the morning newspaper down on his desk. Leading the business section was an article about a protest against his company over its record on diversity.

“No outsider has any business telling me who I should hire or who I should promote,” Barnabas complained. He added, “We absolutely believe in diversity.”

“That’s not reflected in your numbers,” said Stanley, Barnabas’ best friend, and spiritual adviser. “And it’s not what people see when they look at your company.” Stanley and Barnabas were members of the men’s group at their church. Stanley was the man who always told Barnabas what he needed to hear, whether or not he wanted to hear it.

“But we are always looking for good candidates,” Barnabas said. “We send representatives to all the career days at the local high schools and to the regional job fairs in our field.”

“Sure,” Stanley said. “But so does everyone else. You don’t get extra credit for doing the minimum. Do you actually make any hires from those contacts?” Barnabas sat in uncomfortable silence. “I’ll take that as a no,” Stanley said. “It doesn’t help if you don’t live up to what you claim. Saying you’re committed doesn’t count if you don’t do it.”

How much more can be accomplished for the glory of God if we put faith into action with works as well as with words?

Keep in Mind

“Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works” (James 2:26, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Naked (v. 15) *gumnos* (Gk.) — Having little or no clothing.

B. Dead (v. 17) *nekros* (Gk.) — No longer living, deceased.

Say It Correctly

Hermeneutics. HER-meh-NOO-tix.

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

Rahab. When the Israelites sent spies to get a feel of Jericho and the surrounding land of Canaan, Rahab hid the two Israelite spies from local authorities. She recognized the God of Israel as the one true God (Joshua 2:11) and begged the spies to spare the lives of her and her family. The spies instructed Rahab to hang a scarlet rope from her window and then their lives would be spared. This happened, and everyone under Rahab's roof was saved. Later, Rahab became the mother of Boaz, whom we read about in the book of Ruth.

Background

James, the brother of Jesus Christ, is popularly agreed as the author of this epistle. The date of James is difficult to ascertain, but the epistle must have been written before AD 62 when James was martyred, with AD 44–48 being the most probable date of writing.

James' audience was the Jewish-Christians who he described as “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1). They were scattered as a result of the persecution that ensued after the death of Stephen (Acts 7:54–58). The emerging attitudes of these Jewish-Christians necessitated the writing of this letter. These attitudes included oppression of the poor (5:1–6), religious superficiality (1:22–27), discrimination (2:1–13) and bitterness (3:1–12, 4:1–3).

The passage for today seems to contradict Paul's teaching that salvation is by faith alone. It was a stumbling block to Martin Luther, who could not reconcile Paul and James on the issue of faith and works. James' letter is not about salvation, however, but argues against a faith that is alone—a faith stripped of practical responses of gratitude to God for salvation. While Paul's argument is that justification is by faith alone, it is clear from the rest of his teaching that this faith is not alone. It needs to be “worked out with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

At-A-Glance

1. Work: Evidence of Faith (James 2:14–19)
2. Those Who Accompanied Their Faith with Works (vv. 20–26)

In Depth

1. Work: Evidence of Faith (James 2:14–19)

Some people believe James seems to be in sharp contradiction with Paul on the issue of justification by faith in these verses. However, both authors agree with each other. The words “faith” and “works” are used differently by Paul in Romans 3–4 and James in James 2:14, 17, and 26. In Romans “faith” means “a living trust in God,” but in James, it is a mere belief, uninspired by the Spirit of God. The “works” for Paul are deeds to fulfill the law, by rote legalism; for James “works” are done out of love. Putting it differently the works Paul speaks about are those that precede faith, while the works of James are those done in faith. James teaches that “faith without work is dead,” inwardly and outwardly. Such faith bears no fruit and never will because it is dead.

The little parable (vv. 15–17) about sending a needy brother or sister away without assistance parallels John's question: “But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” (1 John 3:17). Evidence of authentic faith is seen in the work of obedience accompanying it.

“A man may say” (James 2:18) indicates that James understands the well-known argument present in his time. He does not argue for the superiority of works over faith; rather, he argues that there is no authentic Christian faith without works of righteousness. Such faith is worthless, like that of demons that believe in God and shudder (v. 19) but fail to back it up with obedience to God.

How can believers demonstrate their faith in a society where a tight budget governs spending?

2. Those Who Accompanied Their Faith with Works (vv. 20–26)

James in this section proves his point by alluding to their ancestors Abraham and Rahab the prostitute as examples of those who backed their faith with work. Abraham “being justified by works” seems to be a

contradiction to Paul’s statement that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6). Both Paul and James support their position with Genesis 15:6 but in different events and context. Paul’s reference to Abraham’s faith was at a time between when Abraham had been promised a child and when Isaac finally arrived. James, on the other hand, refers to Abraham’s faith when he offered Isaac, his son, upon the altar (Genesis 22:1–19). This kind of faith was accompanied by action—offering his son on the altar for sacrifice. Abraham was not justified by this action but by the faith that produced it.

Rahab, the second proof, was also mentioned in Hebrews as a heroine of the faith (11:31). According to James, her actions were proof of her faith. By faith, she risked her life to save the lives of the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:1–21). James concludes his argument with a human body as an illustration: “As the body without the Spirit is dead, so faith is dead without work” (James 2:26). To put it differently, just like death and decay ensue when the body is separated from the spirit, faith will decay without righteous works to sustain it.

How would you reconcile Paul and James on this issue of faith and works? Would you share a situation where you accompanied your faith with action?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why might some believers think there can be a divide where some have faith and some have works (James 2:18)? What happens with a congregation tries to have faith without works or works without faith?
2. If the demons do believe in one God and fear Him, why are they condemned (v. 19)?
3. What actions proved Abraham’s faith (vv. 21–23)? What actions proved Rahab’s (v. 25)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Discuss how James 2:18 is not in contradiction with Romans 3:28.
2. When a person does nothing for the physical needs of another because they are unable to help, is the person’s faith a dead faith?

Liberating Lesson

We are in a society where people are taught to spend strictly according to their budget; things outside the budget are not prioritized. This sometimes makes it challenging to help believers who approach us for help (when we can). Nevertheless, failure to do so is an expression of lacking faith. Some people want to be told earlier about a need so they can factor it into their expenses, but there are certain cases that do not work that way. For example, the case in James, where a believer just approaches you and asks for your help. Speaking words of encouragement and not attending to that need is inauthentic faith. Further, personal faith in Christ for salvation without social justice is dead. Helping the homeless find shelter, clothing the naked on the street, visiting prisoners and the sick, and speaking for the oppressed or persecuted are ways of authenticating our faith. We are called to demonstrate our faith by action.

Application for Activation

Consider visiting prisoners or shelters this week to provide nice clothes, nonperishables, words of encouragement, and other personal items.

Participating in the projects of your church is another way of demonstrating your faith. Identify one or more projects in the church and become active!

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

Do Paul and James disagree on the subject of faith and works (cf. Ephesians 2:8–10; James 2:24)? Is Scripture inconsistent or, worse, contradictory? Are we justified by faith alone, or are works involved? Christians have wrestled with these questions ever since the first century.

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

The literary construction of this part 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.” This is quite different from “Suppose a man has faith.” To actually have faith versus saying you have faith are two entirely different things. The second rhetorical question today would be worded, “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 indicating someone in dire straits or desperate need, with a “naked” (Gk. *gumnos*, *goom- NOCE*) brother or sister who is also “destitute of daily food.” The common phrase “Depart in peace” means, in essence, “Go get what you need from someone else—but know that I care.” Another similar response might be “You’ll be in my thoughts and prayers.” Such words come from a faith that is useless and dead (Gk. *nekros*, *neh-KROCE*), which is the plain sense of the word; James is not pulling punches. “What good is a dead faith?” James asks. Salvation or justification, it can be said, is comprised of both hearing and doing; the same can be said of faith and works (cf. Matthew 7:24; 1 Thessalonians 1:3). Genuine faith is a gift that comes from God (Ephesians 2:8), and works are a natural expression of such faith. Faith and works are two sides of the same coin. For many, Paul and James have put faith and works at odds—and too often the argument has been framed as if one must make an either-or choice. In reality, they were talking about two types of faith—only one of which is alive, while the other is dead, incapable of saving anyone (cf. Galatians 5:6, 6:15; 1 Corinthians 7:19).

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 beg 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 asks for evidence of the faith he claimed to possess, reminding him that even demons can make such claims. 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. Both Paul (Romans 4:9) and James describe God calling Abraham righteous because of his faith. James here 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 while He went against His own promise. James is saying that Abraham's obedient "work"—a tangible act of faith in putting Isaac on the altar and being willing to sacrifice even the son of promise—was a fulfillment of Scripture. James refers to Genesis 15:6 when God reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness—a faith in the seemingly impossible covenant promise of countless generations born to an elderly couple. Abraham had faith, and God made a covenant with him. 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, and an example, plus having presented an argument from the Old Testament, James makes an early conclusion prior to making yet another argument from the Old Testament. It is this statement, which too many have pulled out of the context of his carefully constructed presentation, that 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 "Exhibit 2" of the argument part of his presentation. Some might feel as they cannot relate to the head of the Jewish nation, the national shining star, Abraham. What about an example from the opposite side of society—would that be closer to home or at least more relatable? Rahab was a prostitute, yet both she and Abraham were examples of faith and works. 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 makes his second parallel conclusion, creating a second passage that many after him would neatly clip from its clear context and use to make claims that do not square with either James' complete argument or the whole counsel of God from both testaments. The concept of faith without works is so easy that even demons can do it. No lifestyle change is needed, nor are sacrifices required. No compassion is necessary, and no giving of time, treasure, or talent will be expected. Most Americans claim to be "Christian," but how many live Christian lives? Many attend church occasionally, but what are they doing during the week? A modern adage holds that standing in a donut shop doesn't make one a donut, and walking into a garage doesn't turn someone into a car, so going to a church doesn't make you a Christian. Christians would do well to cease and desist from

justifying their absence or lack of compassion, and instead begin at once to incarnate the hands and feet and heart of Jesus in a cold, lonely, and desperate world.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Abraham Blessed for Fearing God
(Genesis 22:9–19)

TUESDAY

Spies Saved by Rahab's Quick Actions
(Joshua 2:1–7)

WEDNESDAY

Forgive Others Like God Forgave You
(Matthew 18:23–35)

THURSDAY

Devoted to Good Works, Avoiding Distractions
(Titus 3:1–2, 8–11)

FRIDAY

Works Guided by Loyalty to God
(Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

SATURDAY

Receive God's Mercy by Showing Mercy
(James 2:8–13)

SUNDAY

Faith and Works Must Go Together
(James 2:14–26)