

# LIVING FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 18:23-35

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26

## 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?

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.



## KEY VERSE

*As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. —James 2:26*

# MANY FACES OF WISDOM

## Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James

LESSONS 9–13

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe workless faith.
2. Give examples of the proper relationship between faith and works.
3. Develop a list of ways to demonstrate faith through action, and choose one to initiate personally in the week ahead.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

A. “A Right Strawy Epistle”

B. Lesson Context

#### I. Saving Faith (JAMES 2:14-17)

A. Speech or Action (vv. 14-16)

B. Alive or Dead (v. 17)

*Vice and Virtue*

#### II. Vain Faith (JAMES 2:18, 19)

A. Demonstrated Belief (v. 18)

B. Bare Belief (v. 19)

#### III. Exemplars of Faith (JAMES 2:20-26)

A. Abraham (vv. 20-24)

B. Rahab (vv. 25, 26)

*Antiheroes*

#### Conclusion

A. In Word and Deed

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. “A Right Strawy Epistle”

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 points of disagreement with medieval Roman Catholic doctrine to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He had come to see that Catholicism’s position on the role of works in salvation did not match the apostle Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith.

As debates heated up, the letter of James became more and more a source of frustration for Luther. Representatives of the pope kept quoting it to him in reply to his assertions about justification by faith. By the time Luther published his German translation of the New Testament in the 1520s, he had come to view the letter of James as a “right strawy epistle . . . [that] has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”

Luther believed he was justified in this conclusion for three reasons: (1) James seems to contradict Paul, (2) James makes no mention of Jesus’ death or resurrection, and (3) James himself wasn’t of the same caliber as Paul and other apostles. Consequently, Luther moved James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation from their positions in the Bible at the time and placed them in a separate section at the end of the New Testament.

Luther’s attitude about James eventually melted. But many Christians still have a hard time reconciling James with Paul on the role of works. Today’s lesson revisits this issue in a limited way.

### B. Lesson Context

The Lesson Context of lessons 9 and 10 apply here as well, so that information need not be repeated. But before we move into today’s text, it will be helpful to consider the larger context of the central idea of today’s lesson.

For all the controversy that James 2 has generated on the role of works over the centuries, it can come as a surprise to see how often works are related to salvation elsewhere in Scripture. Consider the scene Jesus paints in Matthew 25:31-46. In the judgment, individual believers are judged on the basis of what they have done or not done—their works.

Also a pointed statement is Revelation 20:12, 13, where the apostle John says he

saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

As important as that issue is, it's easy to allow it to overshadow something else James stresses: the specific economic needs—the reality of life for so many in the ancient world—that drives much of his thoughts in James 2. The first half of the chapter (verses 1-13) warns against discriminating against the poor in favor of the rich; economic need also is an integral part of his argument regarding faith and works in the second half—today's text.

## I. Saving Faith

(JAMES 2:14-17)

### A. Speech or Action (vv. 14-16)

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

The tone of today's text is somewhat combative—James is blunt. He is not a dispassionate scholar who pontificates from an ivory tower on theories of the relationship between faith and works. The phrase *what doth it profit* intends to discover what good can come about, based on the conditions James is about to discuss.

*Faith*, as James is using the term here, is a kind of confessional faith. It is belief or mental assent to the notion that God exists. Faith in its fullness involves a belief and trust that assume the action of a life lived in obedience to the law of Christ (compare Matthew 7:26; James 1:22-25). For the purposes of James's discussion, though, he's using the word *faith* in a more truncated sense that some of his addressees seem to have adopted.

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

Some commentators have seen this example as comic in its exaggeration. "Surely," we might say, "no one would be in a position of having no clothing or food whatsoever." But James may be using overstatement (hyperbole) for effect.

Another possibility is that the word being translated *naked* is intended to signify inadequate clothing or a lack of proper clothing. The same word is used to describe Peter's clothed status before he donned his "fisher's coat" in John 21:7 (compare Matthew 25:36).

*Daily food*, for its part, echoes the need noted in Matthew 6:11 and 25:35.

**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?**

The callousness of the words spoken here comes through clearly. But it is possible that the words are even stronger than the English translation indicates. Commentators disagree about which of two possible interpretations of the verbs *be ye warmed* and [*be ye*] *filled* is the correct one. Seen one way, the actions they suggest put the responsibility for finding shelter and food on the poverty-stricken person in the scenario, as in "Go get yourself warmed up and fed."

Seen another way, these verbs may be an example of what is sometimes called the "divine passive," in which God is the implied source of the action. In other words, the intent would be "May God warm you and fill you up."

Either way, the one speaking avoids personal responsibility to act to meet the need (contrast Luke 3:11). Under the second of the two interpretations, he or she goes so far as to provide religious cover for inaction (contrast 1 John 3:17, 18).

#### What Do You Think?

In what ways can you help someone receive needed clothing, food, etc., this week?

#### Digging Deeper

How do texts such as Acts 4:32-35; 6:1-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; 1 John 3:17, 18; etc., help frame both what you give and how you give it?

## B. Alive or Dead (v. 17)

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

James draws a conclusion that reiterates and strengthens his original point. The phrase *being alone* reminds us that we are dealing with a definition of *faith* that James is opposing: mere intellectual acknowledgment or mental assent to certain truths about God (contrast Galatians 5:6).

#### What Do You Think?

▶ What questions could Christians ask themselves that would reveal whether their faith was dead or dying?

#### Digging Deeper

In that regard, which type of questions are more useful: those dealing with acts of omission or acts of commission? Why?

## ✧ VICE AND VIRTUE ✧

When I was young, our church fellowship gave lip service to saving faith. We were wary of practicing dead faith, so we tended to focus on doing things that we thought would show our true faith.

Looking back on those days, though, I can see that to prove our faith we often focused not on things to *do* but on things *not* to do! We were expected to avoid certain vices because those were behaviors that indicated we did not have saving faith. Yet I can't remember hearing many sermons on developing virtues instead. We were *against* many practices, but it wasn't always easy to identify what we were *for*.

In retrospect, our focus seemed to be more on ourselves than on others. It could be argued that we were negating the teachings of both James and Jesus by releasing ourselves of responsibility to others. How do you live out your "for" faith?

—C. R. B.

## II. Vain Faith

(JAMES 2:18, 19)

### A. Demonstrated Belief (v. 18)

#### 18a. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works.

In the second part of his current line of argument, James describes a hypothetical conversation. A challenge is posed to James's assertion that "faith, if it hath not works, is dead," just stated. The first conversationalist seems intent on putting *faith* and *works* into categories that do not relate to one another. The person is, in effect, arguing that faith and works can be separated without damage to either.

#### 18b. Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

There is no demonstrating of *faith without . . . works* since faith is invisible in and of itself. But the works of which James is speaking are the necessary products of valid faith. Actions really do speak louder than words. The person who claims faith without works makes an absurd, empty claim.

It's possible that James is also opposing here a line of thought that contends that an emphasis on faith by itself is just as acceptable as an emphasis on faith coupled with works. James disagrees: these two options are not equally acceptable since faith and works are fundamentally inseparable (compare Hebrews 11). There is no saving faith that does not manifest itself in works.

#### What Do You Think?

▶ What guardrails can we erect to prevent us from slipping into pride or legalism as we set a visible example in good deeds?

#### Digging Deeper

How does comparing and contrasting Matthew 5:14-16 with Matthew 6:1-4 help frame your conclusion?

## B. Bare Belief (v. 19)

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

James presses his point by referring to what is called the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4; the word *Shema* is the transliteration of the first three Hebrew letters of this verse). This is important as we recall that James is writing to Christians of

Jewish background. Observant Jews of the time recited the Shema three times daily. Its teaching is still understood to be central to the Law of Moses. Jesus agreed with that assessment when He affirmed it to be the commandment that is above all others (Mark 12:28, 29). But what of the person who simply makes this confession and does nothing more?

James affirms that the confession is correct. But then he points out that *the devils* (or demons) *believe* the same thing! They know who God is; they recognized Jesus' identity. Early in Mark's Gospel, Jesus encountered a man with an unclean spirit in a synagogue. When the man saw Jesus, the demons within him cried out, "Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24).

Indeed, there is no confusion among the forces of Satan about who God is and the extent of His power. Because they recognize Him, they *tremble*. The person who claims faith without works is less responsive to God than a demon!

We might sum up James's point with the common saying "Talk is cheap." Claiming to have faith is of no significance at all if we do not act in faith. If demons can at least tremble, should not those who claim to belong to God act in ways that please Him?

### III. Exemplars of Faith

(JAMES 2:20-26)

#### A. Abraham (vv. 20-24)

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

In characterizing those who oppose his view as *vain*, James is calling them "empty," which is how

the same word is translated in Luke 1:53. This is strong language, but we have to remember that James is living in a time that sees no problem with strong moral denunciation of those who are, in fact, in the wrong. Behind the vanity or emptiness of those who cling to a workless faith lies the attempt to think that God accepts people merely on the basis that they acknowledge His existence. Were that the case, then logic would dictate that devils would be saved!

But James seems to realize that arguments from logic might not convince those who oppose his view. So he proceeds to offer concrete evidence from Jewish history.

#### 21a. Was not Abraham our father justified by works.

Recalling again that James is writing to an audience of Christians of Jewish background (James 1:1), it is quite proper for him to appeal to an example involving *Abraham our father* (compare Paul's similar appeal in Romans 4:11, 12, 16; Galatians 3:7, 8, 29.) As we consider that Abraham was *justified by works*, we keep in mind the context of James's remarks of having just said that "faith without works is dead." James asks the question we see here (continued below) in such a way that it assumes agreement. Of course Abraham was justified by his works! Had he had no faith, there would have been no works.

#### 21b. When he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

It is also noteworthy that, even though James speaks of Abraham's works, he specifically has this one very particular work in mind. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is told only once in the Old Testament (Genesis 22:1-19), but it had taken on great significance in the Jewish tradition by the first century AD. Rather than, for example, pointing to Abraham's obedience to God's initial call (12:1-5) or some other event, the rabbis constantly point to this particular act as the preeminent example of Abraham's faithfulness. James, who in many ways is safely assumed to be an observant first-century Jew, is certainly familiar with this tradition. So he draws on it here.

#### 22a. Seest thou how faith wrought with his works.

## HOW TO SAY IT

Abraham	<i>Ay-bruh-ham.</i>
Deuteronomy	<i>Due-ter-abn-uh-me.</i>
Josephus	<i>Jo-see-fus.</i>
Moriah	<i>Mo-rye-uh.</i>
Rahab	<i>Ray-hab.</i>
Shema	<i>She-muh.</i>

When James says Abraham's *faith wrought with his works*, he is saying that the man's faith functioned in tandem with his works (see Hebrews 11:17). Again, the kernel of James's argument in this section is that faith and works are inseparable. They commingle in such a way that Paul speaks of the "work of faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11).

### **22b. And by works was faith made perfect?**

James goes further: it is *by works* that Abraham's *faith* was perfected. Faith itself is brought to its full realization, its final form, its God-intended purpose when it is working (compare Galatians 5:6). This does not imply flawlessness; instead, it means it is sufficient to do what God desires.

### **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.**

*The scripture was fulfilled* because the faith noted in Genesis 15:6 (the verse quoted) was made visible by the action of Genesis 22:1-10. The importance of Genesis 15:6 is seen in its being quoted four times in the New Testament (here plus Romans 4:3, 22; and Galatians 3:6).

Abraham's obedience to the command of God on Mount Moriah placed him in the class of individuals who are counted righteous, who conform to the standard that God had set forth. For Abraham to be *called the Friend of God* (also 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8) reinforces what James has already said about the nature of justification.

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

Is *faith alone*, a faith that produces no action, a valid option? James says no. Abraham's great deed of faith was a long time in coming, but it demonstrated what God had foreseen: genuine trust in God's promise, trust that Abraham later put on the line. To be counted righteous like Abraham, one needs the kind of faith that leads to action. James generalizes from the example of Abraham to reinforce his point.

## **B. Rahab (vv. 25, 26)**

### **25. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received**

### **the messengers, and had sent them out another way?**

We might think it scandalous—or strange, at the least—that James appeals to the example of *Rahab* to make his point. It was already the case in the first century that some had qualms with what Joshua 2 has to say about this woman. (The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, argued that she was not a prostitute, but an innkeeper.) James, however, gives no evidence that he has reservations about appealing to the example of Rahab, even mentioning that she was *the harlot* (compare Hebrews 11:31) when he could have left that part out.

Justification is not about sinless perfection on the part of the one who is declared to be just. Consider, for example, how Abraham himself tried to rush the fulfillment of God's promise by fathering a child with Hagar, Sarah's handmaid (Genesis 16). Abraham's faith faltered at other times as well; these showed up in his actions. Though he willingly left his home for the land God was to show him, he twice revealed a lack of trust in God when he lied to protect himself (12:11-13; 20:1, 2).

Rahab, like Abraham, was justified on the basis of her faithful works—the singular act of harboring the Israelite spies who had entered the city of Jericho. In her hospitality, she provided for Israelites who were in need. In so doing, she set an example of what James calls on his readers to do.

#### *What Do You Think?*

In what situations might you use the example of Rahab as a point of counseling with a fellow believer? Why?

#### *Digging Deeper*

What potential dangers or backfires should you consider before doing so? Why?

### ❧ ANTIHEROES ❧

An antihero is a character who doesn't display classic heroic traits but is nevertheless the protagonist and unlikely hero. Antiheroes have a significant place in history, sometimes playing an evil or good role, but more often an ambiguous one.

Robin Hood and his “band of merry men” are a great example. Most heroes don’t steal from *anyone*, rich or poor. And in the original stories, Robin Hood didn’t just steal—he killed! The story was later sanitized, with Robin Hood outwitting the wealthy to steal their excess and nobly giving his loot to the poor.

Then there is the prostitute Rahab. She was one of the Bible’s many antiheroes, mentioned by James as an example of faith that works. Rahab’s story shows us how the Bible tells it like it is. She is an example of the fact that God uses flawed people to accomplish His work. That gives hope to all of us potential antiheroes doesn’t it? —C. R. B.

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

James concludes this portion of his letter with an analogy. The comparison assumes that *the spirit* is the animating, life-giving force in the human body. This concept is found throughout the Old Testament (example: Psalm 31:5), as well as in the New Testament (Luke 8:55; 23:46). The analogy is new in the course of James’s argument, but the point is the same as before: faith that justifies cannot be separated from works that proceed from it. *Faith without attendant works* is no faith at all.

### What Do You Think?

What are some ways to stay alert to the danger of what has been called “compassion fatigue” as we help meet the needs of others (compare Galatians 6:9)?

### Digging Deeper

Which of those ways would work best for you personally? Why?

## Conclusion

### A. In Word and Deed

In popular usage, faith often equates to mere belief, an intellectual acknowledgment of the existence of God. James shows us that true, saving faith goes much deeper than this: it touches every aspect of our lives and guides our every action. The examples that James uses—Abraham and Rahab—highlight these points. Consider that



Visual for Lesson 11. *Point to this visual as you ask what conclusions people will reach while watching your learners’ actions or inactions.*

it was not Abraham’s mere acknowledgment of God’s promise that justified him. Rather, it was his action on the basis of that promise that justified him. Likewise, it was not mere verbal acknowledgment of the Israelites’ God that justified Rahab (Joshua 2:8, 9). That acknowledgment went hand in hand with her actions in sheltering Israelite spies from certain death (2:2-4). She undoubtedly risked her own life in doing so.

Certainly, we are saved through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8, 9); we cannot earn salvation by our works (Romans 3:27; 9:32; Galatians 2:16). But what type of faith saves? The type that works. A profession of faith must be accompanied by action; otherwise it is no faith at all. A profession of faith that is unaccompanied by the works God intends we do brings disrepute on the faith we claim to have. Unless the Word is changing us inside and out—in heart and mind to speak *and* act—our faith will be no faith at all.

### B. Prayer

Father, may our faith in You not be limited to a mere affirmation of Your existence. Instead, may it be manifested in the way we live, including the way we extend help to those in need. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Faith with no works  
is no faith at all.

# INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

## Into the Lesson

*Option.* Begin by allowing volunteers to share their results of completing last week's take-home activity. Then divide your class into three groups, giving each group one of the following incomplete sentences. Encourage every group member to offer a completion for the group's assigned sentence.

- 1—*You know I love my spouse when you see me doing this:* \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2—*Because I love my children, you'll see me doing this:* \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3—*You know how I feel about my job when you see me doing this:* \_\_\_\_\_.

After a few minutes, call for volunteers to share their completed sentences. Choose a few examples, and ask the class questions like this one: "If [insert name] told you he loves his wife but then did just the opposite of what he mentioned here, what would you conclude?"

Say, "The connection between words and actions is important. Today's Bible study offers us insight on this issue."

## Into the Word

Distribute handouts (you prepare) of the lesson text. As you read the text slowly, listeners should do the following (which you will have printed on the handout): 1—Underline every command. 2—Mark illustrations that clarify commands with ≈ symbol. 3—Mark sections that seem particularly important with \* symbol. 4—Mark surprising sections with ! symbol. 5—Mark anything you don't understand with ? symbol.

Read the text aloud twice to give class members ample opportunity to absorb what it is saying as they perform the above. Then call for volunteers to point out the verses they underlined and marked with ≈. After discussing disagreements, ask for volunteers to tell what sections they marked with other symbols and tell why. As questions come up,

toss them back to the class by asking, "Who has an insight for that question?" Use the commentary to clarify.

*Option.* Distribute copies of the "Reconsider the Stories" exercise from the activity page, which you can download, for deeper study. Ask learners to complete this activity in pairs or triads before you have volunteers share what they've discussed.

*Brainstorming.* Ask half the class to voice reasons why connecting faith with works is difficult; jot responses on the board as they are called out. After two minutes, invite the other half of the class to voice reasons why connecting faith with works is reasonable. Again, take two minutes to jot responses on the board.

During the whole-class discussion that follows, point out that the two lists don't necessarily contradict each other; rather, they actually are mutually supporting at certain points. Ask learners to point out examples of that fact from the two lists. Be prepared to do so yourself.

*Option.* Distribute copies of the "Finish the Thoughts" exercise from the activity page for learners to complete individually as a post-test. Allow only one minute.

## Into Life

Write on the board the phrases *I Believe* and *I Do* as headers to two lists. Ask class members to name tenets of the Christian faith for you to write in the first column. After a suitable list is created, ask learners to suggest specific actions for the *I Do* list that would demonstrate Christian faith for each entry in the *I Believe* listing (example: the statement *I believe Jesus is the only way to God* could draw the response *Therefore I participate in my congregation's efforts to evangelize*).

Challenge students to choose one of the listed actions to initiate personally. Close with prayer for students' faith to be combined with dynamic new works for Christ.