

The Book of James, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Faith Without Works Is Dead

James 2:14-26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the most doctrinally significant lesson in the study, the clearest scriptural refutation of salvation by faith only, so give it the heaviest doctrinal treatment and prepare to teach it with confidence and care. James says plainly that faith without works is dead and that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (2:24). This is the only occurrence of the phrase faith alone in Scripture, and it appears in order to be denied. The aim is to help the teacher and the class hold this clearly: the faith that saves is never alone; it is always a living, obedient faith that takes hold of Christ and shows itself in a transformed life. This is fully consistent with the New Testament's plan of salvation, in which one hears the gospel, believes, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into Him, and then walks faithfully. A bare mental assent that produces no obedience is the dead faith James says cannot save.

The teacher must be ready to harmonize James with Paul, because students will have heard Paul quoted to support faith only. The key is that James and Paul use the word works differently and address different errors. Paul, in Romans and Galatians, denies that we are justified by works of the law, that is, by law-keeping or human merit that would earn salvation and leave room for boasting; he insists salvation is by grace through faith. James denies that a dead, workless faith can save; the works he commends are not meritorious law-keeping but the living fruit and evidence of genuine faith. Strikingly, both men appeal to the very same example, Abraham, and the same verse, Genesis 15:6. Paul shows Abraham was justified by faith, not by earning; James shows that Abraham's faith was the kind that obeyed, completed and proven when he offered Isaac. There is no contradiction: saving faith is a living, obedient faith. Paul and James are two witnesses to one truth.

Pastorally, this lesson must avoid two ditches. On one side is the error of faith only, a profession that never changes the life, against which James thunders. On the other side is a fearful legalism that imagines we earn or sustain our salvation by our own works, which neither James nor Paul teaches. Hold the biblical center: we are saved by grace, through a faith that is living and obedient, and that faith inevitably works through love. Help students examine honestly whether their faith is the living kind, and call them not to anxious self-salvation but to a wholehearted, working trust in Christ. Keep the tone one of marveling at the grace that gives us a living faith, not merely winning an argument.

Question 1

Student Question:

James asks, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (v. 14). What kind of faith is James describing here, and why does he expect the answer that such faith cannot save?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James opens the section with two pointed questions that frame everything that follows: “What good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”

Notice the precise wording. James does not say faith cannot save; he asks whether that faith, the kind that is merely said and produces nothing, can save. The answer expected is no.

Help students see exactly what James is targeting. He is not attacking faith, and he is not adding works as a second saving ingredient alongside faith. He is exposing a counterfeit: a faith that exists only in words, a profession with no corresponding life. He calls it the faith someone merely “says he has.”

This is the heart of the lesson, so state it clearly and warmly. The New Testament everywhere teaches salvation by grace through faith. James is not denying that. He is insisting that the faith which saves is a living faith, the kind that takes hold of Christ and then shows up in obedience and love. A faith that changes nothing has not laid hold of Christ at all.

Set the stage for the whole passage. Over the next verses James will illustrate this dead faith (the empty blessing to the needy), distinguish it from the faith of demons, contrast it with Abraham’s living faith, and conclude that faith without works is as dead as a body without breath. Let students know the argument is building toward a definition of saving faith, not a denial of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saving faith as a living faith that works, never a bare profession.
- The faith James condemns: one that is merely said and produces nothing.
- Salvation by grace through faith, with works as faith’s fruit, not its rival.
- The New Testament plan of salvation as an obedient response of faith (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16).
- The expected answer that a workless faith cannot save.

Discussion Prompts

- What precisely is James targeting when he asks whether that faith can save?
- Why is it important that James condemns a counterfeit faith, not faith itself?
- How does this fit with salvation being by grace through faith?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about the gap between what you say you believe and how you actually live. Where is your faith currently more words than works, and what is one place that gap most needs to close?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites honest self-examination before the doctrinal argument deepens. The aim is not to make students anxious about their salvation but to expose the everyday gaps between profession and practice that James is concerned about.

Help them think concretely. Where do they say they trust God but live as functional worriers? Where do they profess that people matter to God but treat some as nuisances? Where do they claim Christ is Lord but reserve certain areas from His rule? The gaps are usually specific.

Be pastorally careful. A genuine believer can have real gaps and still possess living faith; the question is the overall direction and reality of the life, not flawless consistency. Frame this as the normal, ongoing work of letting faith reach more of life, not a test that the slightest gap fails.

Move toward one concrete closing of the gap. Ask each student to name one place where their walk most needs to catch up with their talk this week. Living faith grows precisely in these honest, specific steps.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The normal Christian work of closing the gap between profession and practice.
- Living faith as the overall direction of a life, not sinless consistency.
- Self-examination that leads to growth, not paralyzing anxiety.
- The lordship of Christ extending over every area of life.

Discussion Prompts

- If people could only watch your life, what would they say you believe?
- Where is your faith currently more words than works?
- What is one specific gap you can begin to close this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

In the example of the brother without clothing or daily food (vv. 15–17), James concludes, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” What does it mean that faith without works is not merely weak or immature but dead, and how does the illustration make that vivid?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James makes his point unforgettable with the illustration of a brother or sister without clothing and daily food, met only with warm words: “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without

anything given. His verdict: “What good is that?” And then the conclusion that lands like a hammer: “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

Stress the word dead, because James does not say such faith is weak, immature, or small. He says it is dead, a corpse. A dead faith has the form of faith but no life in it, just as the empty blessing has the form of compassion but no substance. The illustration makes the abstraction concrete: words without deeds are worthless, and so is faith without works.

Help students feel why this matters so much. A living thing acts according to its nature; a living faith naturally produces works, just as a living tree produces fruit. When there is no fruit at all, James concludes there is no life. The works do not create the life, but their total absence reveals that the life was never there.

Apply it directly. Many people carry a faith that is essentially the empty blessing at the door, sincere-sounding words that never cost anything or change anything. James lovingly but firmly tells them such faith is dead. This is meant to drive us not to despair but to a real, living, working faith in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith without works as dead, not merely weak or immature.
- Works as the natural fruit and evidence of living faith (Matthew 7:16–20).
- The absence of all fruit revealing the absence of life.
- Compassion in deed, not just word, as a mark of real faith (1 John 3:17–18).
- The call to living faith rather than despair.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James call this faith dead rather than weak?
- How does the empty blessing illustrate a workless faith?
- What is the relationship between the life of faith and its fruit?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think of a specific person in need that God has placed within your reach. What would it look like this week for your faith to move from good wishes to actual action toward them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the illustration of the needy brother into a concrete assignment. James grounded living faith partly in tangible care for those who lack food and clothing, so the application should be tangible too.

Ask students to identify a specific person in need within their actual reach, not a distant cause but a real name, a neighbor, a struggling family member, a lonely widow, a single parent. Living faith begins with the person God has actually placed before us.

Help them move from good wishes to action. What would it look like to give, to show up, to provide, to enter their affliction rather than merely feel sympathy from a distance? The whole point of the passage is the difference between saying and doing.

Keep it doable and rooted in grace. The motive is not to earn salvation by works but to let saving faith express itself in love. Ask each student to name one concrete act they will take this week toward a specific person.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living faith expressed in concrete care for the needy.
- The neighbor God has placed before us as the starting point of love.
- Works as the overflow of grace, not the purchase of salvation.
- Faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).

Discussion Prompts

- Who is one specific person in need within your reach?
- What concrete action, not just good wishes, could you take this week?
- How does this act flow from grace rather than earn anything?

Question 5

Student Question:

James imagines someone saying, "You have faith and I have works," and replies, "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (v. 18). He even notes that "the demons believe, and shudder" (v. 19). How does this distinguish genuine saving faith from mere belief that certain things are true?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verse 18 James stages a dialogue: someone claims, "You have faith and I have works," as though these were two equally valid options or spiritual personality types. James will not allow the split. He answers, "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." His point is that invisible, workless faith cannot even be demonstrated; works are how faith becomes visible.

Then comes the devastating line: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder." James grants that mere belief in true propositions is real as far as it goes, even the demons have orthodox theology about God. But demonic belief saves no one. It is

belief that does not submit, does not love, does not obey. It even produces terror rather than trust.

This is a crucial distinction to teach: saving faith is more than believing that certain things are true. It is trusting in and surrendering to the One who is true. The demons believe that God exists and is one; what they lack is the loving, submissive trust that throws itself on God's mercy and follows Him. Help students see that intellectual assent, by itself, is the faith of demons.

Apply it honestly. It is possible to have entirely correct beliefs about God, Christ, and salvation and still not have saving faith, if that belief never becomes trust and obedience. This should sober the merely orthodox and comfort the genuinely trusting, whose faith, however weak, shows itself in a life that leans on and follows Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between intellectual assent and saving trust.
- Works as the visible demonstration of invisible faith.
- The faith of demons: correct belief without submission, love, or trust.
- Saving faith as trust in and surrender to Christ, not mere agreement.
- The insufficiency of orthodoxy without obedient trust.

Discussion Prompts

- How is saving faith more than believing the right things are true?
- What does it mean that even the demons believe and shudder?
- How can correct beliefs coexist with a faith that does not save?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where in your own walk have you settled for believing the right things about God without that belief changing how you live? What would it mean to move from believing facts about Christ to truly trusting and following Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the demon distinction into the student's own walk. Many believers, especially those raised in church, are at risk of a faith that is essentially correct belief without surrendered trust. Invite honest reflection without inducing despair.

Help students discern the symptoms of assent-without-trust: knowing the right answers but feeling no dependence, defending doctrines while harboring unsundered areas, treating faith as a set of conclusions rather than a relationship of trust and obedience.

Point the way forward. Moving from believing facts to trusting Christ is not about acquiring more information but about surrender, actually entrusting one's life to Him, repenting where needed, and following. This is the living faith of the whole New Testament.

Tie it to the broader plan of salvation taught throughout this study. Genuine faith hears the gospel, believes, repents, confesses Christ, is baptized into Him, and then walks with Him. At every stage it is trust expressing itself in obedience, not bare agreement. Encourage students to locate where their faith needs to move from the head to the whole life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The risk of assent-without-trust, especially for the lifelong churchgoer.
- Saving faith as surrender and dependence, not mere conclusion.
- The plan of salvation as trust expressed in obedience (Romans 6:17).
- Discipleship as following Christ, not merely affirming Him.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you settled for right belief without surrendered trust?
- What would it mean to move from believing facts to trusting Christ?
- Where does your faith most need to travel from the head into the whole life?

Question 7

Student Question:

James declares, "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (v. 24), the only place Scripture uses the phrase "faith alone." How do we rightly understand this verse alongside Paul's teaching that we are justified by faith and not by works of the law (Romans 3:28), and what is James insisting upon about the nature of saving faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal pivot of the lesson and one of the most important verses to teach in the entire study, so take your time and teach it with both clarity and care. James writes, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." This is the only place in all of Scripture where the phrase faith alone appears, and James uses it precisely in order to deny it. Make sure students hear that clearly: the Bible's one statement about faith alone says we are not justified by faith alone.

Then immediately address the apparent conflict with Paul, because students will be thinking of it. Paul writes in Romans 3:28 that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. The resolution is not to pit the apostles against each other but to see that they use the word works differently and combat different errors. Paul opposes those who would earn salvation by law-keeping and human merit, leaving room for boasting; against them he insists salvation is the

free gift of God's grace received through faith. James opposes those who claim a faith that is dead and workless; against them he insists that genuine, saving faith always produces the fruit of obedience and love. Paul's works are meritorious law-keeping that cannot save; James's works are the living evidence of a faith that does save.

Drive home the harmony with the shared example, which is the decisive proof that they agree. Both Paul and James appeal to Abraham, and both quote Genesis 15:6, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Paul uses Abraham to show that righteousness came by faith, not by earning. James uses Abraham to show that this faith was the living kind that obeyed God, proven when he offered Isaac. One Abraham, one verse, two complementary truths: he was justified by faith, and his faith was the kind that works. Saving faith is a living, obedient faith. That is the whole point James is insisting upon.

Be careful here to guard both flanks. Do not let this become a teaching that we earn or merit salvation by our works, for that is the very thing Paul denies and James never affirms; the works are fruit, not wages. And do not let students retreat into faith only, the profession that never obeys, for that is precisely what James denies. Hold the center the New Testament holds: we are saved by grace, through a living faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses, is baptized into Christ, and then walks in obedience and love. Justification is by faith, and the faith that justifies is never alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- James 2:24 as the only use of faith alone in Scripture, stated in order to deny it.
- The harmony of James and Paul: different uses of works, different errors opposed.
- Paul's works of the law (meritorious, earning) versus James's works (the fruit and evidence of faith).
- The shared appeal to Abraham and Genesis 15:6 as proof the apostles agree.
- Justification by grace through a living, obedient faith, never by faith only and never by earning.
- The refutation of salvation by faith only as central to this passage.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that the Bible's only mention of faith alone denies it?
- How do James and Paul use the word works differently?
- How does the shared example of Abraham show that the two apostles agree?

Question 8

Student Question:

Consider the ways you might be tempted to treat faith as a one-time decision that makes no further claim on your life. How does James's teaching that living faith works call you to a faith that obeys, repents, and follows day by day?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the doctrine pastorally, confronting the popular notion that faith is a single past decision that makes no further claim on the life. Many have been taught to point back to a moment, a prayer, a card signed, as the whole of their faith. James's teaching dismantles that.

Help students see that living faith is ongoing, not merely initial. The same faith that first takes hold of Christ continues to trust, obey, repent, and follow. Faith is not a transaction completed in the past but a relationship lived in the present. This is consistent with the New Testament's call to continue in the faith, to remain faithful, to endure.

Connect this to the larger doctrinal commitments of the study. Salvation is not a one-time event that guarantees the outcome regardless of how one then lives; it is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience. A faith that obeys, repents, and follows day by day is not legalism; it is simply living faith continuing to live.

Apply it concretely. Ask students where they have treated faith as a closed transaction rather than a present walk. What would it look like this week to live as those whose faith is active, obeying and following Christ in real time, not merely remembering a decision once made?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith as an ongoing walk, not merely a past decision (Colossians 2:6).
- Salvation preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, against once-saved-always-saved.
- Continuing in the faith and remaining faithful as the New Testament pattern (John 8:31; Colossians 1:23).
- Daily repentance, obedience, and following as the life of living faith.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you treated faith as a closed transaction rather than a present walk?
- How does James's teaching call you to a faith that keeps obeying and following?
- What would living faith look like in real time this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

James points to Abraham, whose faith was “active along with his works,” and “faith was completed by his works” when he offered Isaac (vv. 21–23), and even to Rahab (v. 25), concluding, “as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (v. 26). What does the example of Abraham teach about how faith and obedience belong together, and why is it significant that his faith was “completed” by what he did?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here James clinches the argument with Abraham, the supreme example of faith, so let the example do its full work. He says Abraham's faith was "active along with his works," and that "faith was completed by his works" when he offered Isaac on the altar. Then he quotes Genesis 15:6, that Abraham believed God and it was counted as righteousness, showing that the believing and the obeying were one living reality.

Explain the word completed. James does not mean Abraham's faith was incomplete until he added works, as though works were a separate ingredient. He means Abraham's faith reached its full expression, its maturity and proof, in the obedience of offering Isaac. The faith that believed God's promise in Genesis 15 was the same faith that obeyed God's command in Genesis 22. Faith and works were not two things; they were one faith, believing and obeying.

Note that James even adds Rahab, a Gentile prostitute, as a second witness. Her faith was shown and proven when she welcomed the spies and acted to protect them. James deliberately pairs the revered patriarch and the outsider woman to show that living, working faith is the only kind that saves, regardless of background. Both believed, and both acted on what they believed.

Then comes the final, vivid conclusion: "as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." Works are to faith what breath is to the body, the sign and expression of life. A body without breath is a corpse; a faith without works is dead. Help students feel the force of this closing image and connect it back to the whole passage. The question James has been pressing throughout is simply this: is your faith alive? Living faith believes God and, like Abraham, obeys Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Abraham as the shared biblical example of justifying faith (Genesis 15:6; 22:1–18).
- Faith completed, that is, brought to full expression and proof, by obedience.
- The unity of believing and obeying in Abraham's one living faith.
- Rahab as a second witness that living faith acts (Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31).
- Faith without works as dead as a body without breath.
- Saving faith as living, obedient faith, the consistent witness of Scripture.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Abraham's faith was completed by his works?
- Why does James pair Abraham with Rahab as examples?
- How does the image of body and breath capture the relationship of faith and works?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. James calls us to a faith that is alive, that takes hold of Christ and shows itself in a transformed life. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to let your faith become visible in your works this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks students to make their faith visible in one concrete way this week. The entire passage has insisted that living faith shows itself, so the lesson should end not in abstraction but in a specific, nameable act.

Help students draw the threads together. The passage has exposed dead faith, distinguished it from the faith of demons, harmonized James with Paul, and held up Abraham and Rahab as examples of faith that obeys. Where is Jesus calling each student to let their own faith become visible?

Encourage a single, ownable commitment anchored in the text. It may be an act of mercy toward the needy, a step of obedience long delayed, a surrender of an area withheld, or a movement from mere belief to active trust. Specific and doable.

Close by guarding the grace at the heart of it all. We do not work in order to be loved by God; we work because we have been loved, and because living faith cannot help but live. Lift students' eyes to Christ, who gives us a living faith and then walks with us as it grows feet and hands. Let the marvel be that grace produces a faith that works.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living faith made visible in concrete obedience.
- Grace as the source and works as the fruit, never the reverse.
- Christ giving and growing a living faith in His people.
- Sanctification as the ongoing animation of faith into a transformed life.

Discussion Prompts

- In one sentence, how is Jesus calling you to make your faith visible this week?
- Which thread of this passage most presses on you: mercy, obedience, surrender, or trust?
- How does grace, not earning, fuel the works that flow from living faith?