

The Book of James

Lesson 5: Faith Without Works Is Dead -- James 2:14-26

A man stands at your door on a freezing night. He has no coat, no food, and the wind is cutting straight through him. You open the door, look him in the eye, and say with real warmth, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled." Then you close the door and go back to your dinner. James asks the obvious question, the one that hangs in the cold air: what good was that? Words of blessing with an empty hand are not kindness. They are a cruel kind of theater.

That picture is James's way of getting at something far deeper than charity. He is asking what kind of faith actually saves. "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" The way he phrases it expects the answer no. A faith that is only said, only claimed, only believed in the head, is like that word of blessing at the door. It sounds right and accomplishes nothing.

This is the passage many people find puzzling, because they have heard that we are saved by faith and not by works, and here is James saying, in plain words, that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." It is the only place in all of Scripture where the phrase "faith alone" appears, and it appears in order to be denied. James is not contradicting the gospel of grace. He is defining what real, living faith looks like, the kind that takes hold of Christ and then takes hold of life.

He proves it with Abraham, the great example of faith, who believed God and whose faith was "completed by his works" when he offered Isaac on the altar. Real faith and faithful obedience were never enemies in Abraham; they were one living thing. So we come to this passage to settle a question that touches our very salvation: is our faith the living, working, obedient kind that James and Paul and Abraham all describe, or is it the dead kind that says the right words at the door and never lifts a hand?

Group Discussion: Why do you think the idea of a faith that costs nothing and does nothing is so appealing to people? What makes James's insistence on a working faith uncomfortable, and also freeing?

Personal Reflection: If someone could not hear you talk about your faith but could only watch your life this week, what would they conclude you actually believe? Where is there a gap between what you profess and what you do?

Read James 2:14-26

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 15:6 and 22:1–18, Abraham believed God and his faith was proven in offering Isaac; Romans 3:28 and 4:1–5, justified by faith apart from works of law, with

Abraham as the example; Galatians 5:6, faith working through love; Matthew 7:21, not everyone who says Lord, Lord, but the one who does the Father's will; Ephesians 2:8-10, saved by grace through faith, created for good works; Titus 1:16, professing to know God but denying Him by works.