

Living by Faith

Lesson 12: Faith Without Works Is Dead: Living Faith -- James 2:14-26

Imagine a man standing at your door on a freezing morning. His coat is thin, his shoes are split, and you can see by his face that he has not eaten. You open the door, smile warmly, and say, 'Friend, I want you to know I really care about you. Go in peace. Stay warm. Eat well.' Then you close the door and go back to your breakfast. He is still cold. He is still hungry. He is still standing on your step. James asks the question that hangs in the air: what good was your warm wish to him? And then he asks the question that should make every one of us go quiet: what good is a faith that works exactly like that?

We have spent eleven lessons walking through the great gallery of Hebrews 11, and if you noticed one thing about it, you noticed this: not a single person in that chapter believed in their head and then sat still. By faith Abel offered. By faith Noah built. By faith Abraham obeyed and went out, not knowing where he was going. Faith, in the Bible, is something you can watch. It has feet. It has hands. It packs bags and climbs mountains and stands at Red Seas. Now, in James, we come to the verse that gathers up everything we have seen and states the principle as plainly as it can be said.

James does not write to attack faith. He treasures faith. What he attacks is a counterfeit, a faith that has shrunk down to mere words, a faith that says all the right things and does none of them. He even reminds us that the demons believe God is one, and they believe it firmly enough to shudder. So believing a true fact about God, all by itself, is not what saves a soul. Even the dark powers can manage that much. The faith that saves is alive, and the proof that it is alive is that it moves.

This is the capstone of our whole study, and it is meant to be both clear and tender. Maybe you have wondered, somewhere down deep, whether your faith is the living kind or only the resting kind. That is a good and honest question to bring here. James is not handing us a heavier burden; he is handing us a mirror, and beside the mirror he sets the hope of the gospel. The same Jesus who calls us to a working faith is the One who works it in us. Let us look honestly, then, at the difference between a faith that lives and a faith that has quietly died, so that ours may be the living kind.

Group Discussion: Why do you think it is so easy for sincere people to settle for a faith that is mostly words, agreeing with the truth about God while changing very little about how they actually live?

Personal Reflection: If a stranger could only know your faith by watching what you do with your time, your money, and the people God puts in your path, what would they conclude about what you truly believe?

Read James 2:14–26

Study Questions

1. James opens with a pointed question: 'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?' (James 2:14). What kind of faith is James describing here, and why does he phrase it as a faith someone merely 'says' he has? What does his question reveal about the difference between claiming faith and possessing it?
2. James pictures a brother or sister who is poorly clothed and lacking daily food, met only with kind words and no help (James 2:15–16). Where in your own life are you tempted to substitute warm feelings or good intentions for the actual deeds love requires?
3. James concludes, 'So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead' (James 2:17). What does it mean for a faith to be 'dead,' and how does calling it dead differ from calling it merely weak or small? Why does James reach for the language of life and death here?
4. Think honestly about your own walk this past month. Where has your faith been clearly alive and active, and where has it been quiet and still, more belief than obedience?
5. James writes, 'You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder' (James 2:19). Why does James point to the belief of demons, and what does this teach us about the limits of mere intellectual assent? How does this expose the difference between believing facts about God and the trusting, obedient faith that saves?

6. Are there truths about God that you fully agree are true, yet have never really acted upon? What would it look like this week to let one of those truths move from your head into your hands?

7. James says Abraham was 'justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac,' and that 'faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works' (James 2:21-22). What does it mean that Abraham's faith was 'completed' or perfected by his works? How does Abraham's life show that genuine faith and obedient action are never truly separate?

8. When you read that Abraham's faith was made complete through obedience, what is one specific act of obedience God seems to be asking of you in order to bring your own faith to maturity?

9. James states it as plainly as it can be said: 'You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' (James 2:24), and he adds that Rahab too was 'justified by works' when she received the messengers, closing with the image, 'as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead' (James 2:26). How do we understand this clear statement that we are justified by works and not by faith only? What is the difference between the living, obedient faith that saves and the dead faith that cannot, and how does this connect to the way the New Testament tells us to respond to the gospel: hearing the word, believing that Jesus is the Christ, repenting of sin, confessing Him, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins, followed by a faithful walk?

10. Looking back across this entire study, from the definition of faith in Hebrews 11 through every name in that great gallery to the plain principle of James 2, name one concrete way

Jesus is forming a living, working faith in you. What is the next step of obedient trust He is calling you to take?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 7:21, not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom, but the one who does the will of the Father; Galatians 5:6, the only thing that counts is faith working through love; Acts 2:38, the gospel response of repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins; Romans 6:3-4, being baptized into Christ and raised to walk in newness of life; James 1:22, be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.