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Reconstructing Christianity

A Study in the Book of James

Week 4

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Week 5 | James 2:14–26

Imagine you met a couple who said they were married, but they didn’t know much about each other, do anything for one another, or even talk. They wouldn’t seem very married.

What if you knew someone who claimed to be a doctor but had no medical knowledge and couldn’t even correctly put on a Band-Aid? You would question that he was what he said he was.

Actions matter! A label is only believable if your life backs it up. In the verses we’ll read this week, this point James’ makes about the Christian life. You claim to have faith in Christ, your actions should line up.

### Theme Verse for the series:

*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.* James 1:22

# Day 1

As we read through our central passage for the week, take a moment to scan the first half of [chapter 2](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Jas2) and remember James’ main point. What concerns was he addressing?

## Read

### James 2:14–26 (NIV)

14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

18But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

25In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

## Think About

There have been times when these verses have caused a lot of chatter among Christians. At first glance it may seem that James doesn’t line up with the apostle Paul’s teaching on salvation by faith. What are some initial questions that pop into your head about this passage?

We trust that as we dive into this passage clarity will come. What we’ll discover is “James is not arguing that works must be *added to* faith. His point, rather, is that genuine biblical faith will inevitably be characterized by works”[[1]](#footnote-2)

## Pray

Praise the Lord that we are saved by faith and not our works! Then ask the Father to strengthen your faith by empowering you to live it fully.

## Talk about

*You’re more likely to apply what you’re learning from the Bible if you’re talking about it. Have regular, meaningful conversations about James with a friend, family member, your CF Encourager, or your small group. We’ll give you a question or two each day to help start the conversation.*

* What is the relationship between faith and works in this passage?
* What do you think it mean to have a "dead" faith?

# Day 2

Today we’ll start breaking down James 2:14–26, starting with the first few verses.

## Read

### James 2:14–18 (NIV)

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

18But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

## Study

A cross reference is simply a companion verse that has some parallel to the verse you’re studying. You’ll often see notations in study Bibles where scholars point to other parts of the Bible that they find relevant to the verse at hand.

We’ve done a little bit of careful cross referencing so far in this study, but we haven’t taught it as a skill that students of the Bible can use to deepen their study. But before we begin, it's important to note to that cross referencing can pull you away from the depth and richness of a text just as much as it can enhance them.  We want to make sure we do it well. The context of both the original verse and the reference is key.

Here we are looking at references that come mostly out of the Book of Matthew. We’re providing the references this time, but study Bibles and commentaries will often provide cross references that you can look up on your own.

The references below are pointing to passages in which Jesus is speaking or teaching.

* Look at James 2:14 and read [Matthew 7:24–27](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Mt7.24). (Jesus speaking, Sermon on the Mount)
* Look at James 2:15 and read [Matthew 25:35–40](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Mt25.35). (Jesus speaking to disciples on the Mount of Olives)
* Look at James 2:18 and draw a line to the margin noting the cross reference and read [Matthew 7:16–20](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Mt7.16). (Jesus speaking, Sermon on the Mount)

## Think about

Remember back to when we opened the study and talked a little bit about who James was? It’s amazing to think that the man who wrote these words was the little brother of Jesus. He grew up with Jesus. James saw how he played with his siblings, how he did his chores, how he treated the neighbors, and he watched, slightly confused, as Jesus stepped into ministry, became popular and then became hated.  James was raised with “the perfect law that brings freedom” and at some point, realized Jesus’ complete identity — Messiah, Savior, and King.

No doubt, the way Jesus lived demonstrated who he was. If we claim to be Christians, and bear the name of Christ, we must strive to live as he did by the power of his Holy Spirit. That includes showing mercy and compassion, just as Jesus did. When we ignore the basic human needs of people created in the image of God, we are failing our Messiah, Savior, and King.

## Pray

Sometimes we fail to live with generosity because our faith is shallow. We don’t fully trust God to care for our needs, so we are hesitant to share what we have out of fear that we won’t have enough. Ask the Lord for greater faith in his provision so you can give freely to others. Pray that you would have mercy and compassion for those in need, then act. Pray for an opportunity this week to help meet someone’s basic, physical need.

## Talk about

* Besides helping those in need, what are some other ways our actions demonstrate our faith?
* Discuss some practical ways we can meet the physical needs of people in our church body? What about in our community? Challenge one another to take action this week.

# Day 3

In our verses for today, we’ll see James continue to develop the idea of faith demonstrated by actions.

## Read

### James 2:18–22 (NIV)

18But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

## Study

Yesterday we looked at a couple verses from of our passage, and today I want to do that again.  Look at verse 19, “*Even the demons believe that — and shudder.”*

**In this verse, what is “that” referring to?**

Unlike the worshippers of the Roman gods, the demons are monotheistic. They believe that God is one. They have seen God’s glory for themselves. It’s crazy to think, but we actually share some of our belief system with the demons. Where we differ is in who we obey.

As Christians, we believe that God truly is who he says he is and choose to give him the authority in our lives. When we submit to him, he guides and directs us in a way that brings him glory and builds his kingdom, and that is not what the demons are interested in.

There are a couple of verses that seem to sum up James’ main idea in this section. One is verse 18. Another one is verse 22. (Notice that a form of “*teleios*” makes another appearance.) What is James trying to get his audience to understand?

## Think about

When we believe in something, we often act upon that belief. We don’t sit down in a flimsy looking chair unless at some level we believe that it will hold us. We don’t get on an airplane without some faith that it won’t crash. Every day we put our faith in people and things and act out of that faith. What James is talking about here is very similar. If you say you have faith, great— act. Real faith will show up in your life. Faith without deeds is useless or dead.

## Pray

Is your life characterized by actions that reveal your faith? Ask the Spirit to reveal areas where your actions fail to demonstrate your belief in Christ. Pray over those areas, ask for forgiveness, and repent.

## Talk about

* What obstacles do you encounter that keep you from living out your faith? How can we overcome those obstacles?

# Day 4

*The Pastors Pregame Podcast is back this week with our regular line up. New episodes every Thursday on your favorite podcast app.*

Today we’ll continue in our study of James, chapter 2.

## Read

### James 2:20–26 (NIV)

20You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

25In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead

## Study

There are two specific names listed in our passage and James iss giving them as examples. Let’s dig a little into the stories of the people he mentions — first in verse 21 and then in verse 25.

**What do you learn about them from our passage in James?**

The story that the Jewish people in James’ time pointed to as THE quintessential example of Abraham’s faith is his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Read [Genesis 22](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Ge22). Then read Rahab’s story in [Joshua 2:1–21](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Jos2.1).

## Think about

“James, just as much as Paul, roots a person’s justification in their faith. He does *not* say ‘a person is justified by works and not by faith,’ but says ‘not by faith *alone*.’ The addition of ‘alone’ (*monon*) shows clearly that James refers to the bogus faith that he has been attacking throughout this paragraph: the faith that a person ‘claims’ to have (v. 14); a faith that is, in fact, ‘dead’ (vv. 17 and 26) and ‘useless’ (v. 20).[[2]](#footnote-3)

“In chapter 1, James has dealt with believers who think they have faith because they have *heard* God’s word (1:22); in chapter 2, he deals with believers who think they have faith because they *say* they have faith (2:14). Neither hearing nor speaking is sufficient by itself to demonstrate live, genuine, saving faith. An “implanted” faith has action that works together with faith and completes it.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

All the talk about faith and works is not a question of systematic theology that we should simply ponder. It is a call to wake up and see clearly what God is inviting us into.

## Pray

Pray that you would have the faith of Abraham and Rahab!

## Talk about

* How does the example of Abraham illustrate the connection between faith and works? What about Rahab?
* How do you reconcile the message of James 2:14-26 with other passages in the Bible that emphasize faith alone?
* What role does love play in the relationship between faith and works, as described in this passage?

# Day 5

It’s Friday! We reserve the fifth day of our study for a time of reflection and prayer. James is a challenging book, and we’ll need time to digest what we’ve learned and prayerfully seek the Spirit’s guidance to help us apply his truth to our lives.

## Reflect

Reread our passage for this week and ask the Spirit for wisdom.

### James 2:14–26 (NIV)

14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

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## Connect

Maybe we need to squint a little, but can you see it? Do you hear the rhythm of the gospel in the truth James writes to us? Like the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair, we experience the gospel deeper as we allow our brokenness to be laid at his feet. James isn’t speaking here about deeds we do to show we have it all together. He’s talking about action that flows out of a heart that understands the incredible mercy and grace of God because we’ve seen our need for a savior and said yes to making him Lord of our life.

We all have moments where we are living primarily for ourselves. Where our will and desires supersede our love for Jesus and others and betray the faith we claim. We say the words, “I’m saved by faith in Jesus and his grace alone,” but fail to live that reality. In those moments our faith is lacking.  This is what James knows. Faith that doesn’t produce action in our lives is useless, worthless, dead.

God made us, loves us, and though we sin and run from him at times, he never stops loving us. He simply can’t; it’s not in his character to be unfaithful. He’s provided a way for us to experience life with him through his son and when we choose to humbly submit to him, he transforms us into people who more clearly represent him to the world around us. Saving faith will be demonstrated, however imperfectly, in an ever-changing, evermore-Christlike life.

## Respond

* Think through this week’s passage. How is the Spirit speaking to you?
* If you discuss what you’re learning in James with someone else, you’re more likely to act on it. Have a meaningful conversation about something you’ve discovered in James today.

1. Douglas J. Moo, [*The Letter of James*](https://ref.ly/logosres/pntc80jam2?ref=Bible.Jas2.14-26&off=2878&ctx=he+recognition+that+~James+is+not+arguing), ed. D. A. Carson, Second Edition, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Douglas J. Moo, [*The Letter of James*](https://ref.ly/logosres/pntc80jam2?ref=Bible.Jas2.24&off=1338&ctx=made+at+the+outset%3a+~James%2c+just+as+much+), ed. D. A. Carson, Second Edition, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 174–175. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Aída Besançon Spencer, [*A Commentary on James*](https://ref.ly/logosres/commjamescomm?ref=Bible.Jas2.1-26&off=3357&ctx=living+body+(2%3a26).+~In+chapter+1%2c+James+), Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)