

The Book of James

Session 5: James 2:14–26

OPEN

Are you a gardener? A farmer? Or do you kill houseplants?

What sort of plant, flower, or produce do you like the most?

Do you have any “secrets of success” in growing things?

READ

Read James 2:14–26.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 5: *James 2:14–26* (7 minutes).

DISCUSS

This passage has been at the heart of a faith-and-works controversy for centuries. Are we saved by the good works we do, or by faith in Christ? That's an important question, and we'll get back to it. But maybe James is dealing with a very different question: *What is the nature of genuine faith in Christ?* In other words, what does it look like? What effect does it have in our lives?

In verses 15–16, James gives us a YouTube video, sort of. **It would be a clever comedy sketch if it weren't so sad. How does it go?**

What's the answer to the question in verse 16? What good is it to offer good wishes but no practical help?

Our faith, apart from any outworking, apart from any works is dead. In the video Francis put it this way,

I don't know if James could have picked stronger language. It doesn't matter what you say if you don't act, it's dead. Your faith—I don't care how much you talk about it—it's pointless, it's worthless, it's dead.

In verse 18, we see two kinds of faith. **How are they described?**

Don't get confused by who's the "you" and who's the "someone." The beginning of the verse just sets up a binary challenge—you either have faith or works. But the next part of the verse challenges that. Both people have faith. One person has faith without works and the other *shows* his faith *by* his works.

So the two kinds of faith are "with" and "without" works—a living faith and a dead faith.

So then, verse 19 is referring to the "without works" kind of faith. **What does it say about that kind of faith?**

Faith in the fact that there is one God is good, but not remarkable, James says. It puts you on a par with demons. In fact, demons might be a bit ahead of you, because when they think about God they "shudder." At least their faith brings about some response—shuddering. If you believe in God and there is no impact in your life, no

actions that result from that, then that faith is essentially “dead” (as he says in verse 17).

Why do you think James chooses the oneness of God as the example of basic faith, and not, say, the atoning death of Jesus?

Leader: *This is a tough question, and your group might come up with good theories to solve it. God’s oneness was, of course, the central tenet of Jewish faith (see Deuteronomy 6:4, which is regularly recited in Hebrew tradition). We know James is writing this to Jewish Christians. Could he also be writing to Jews who have not yet accepted Jesus as Savior, or maybe they’re on the fence about it? Could this whole faith-and-works argument be calling these Jews from a generic Jewish faith to a life-changing Christian faith?*

Or maybe James is just choosing the lowest common denominator of belief—“one God”—because he knows a thorough faith in Christ as Savior unleashes the Spirit’s power to lead us into these good works.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about faith and works in the following Bible passages.

Ephesians 2:8–10; Philippians 3:7–10; Galatians 6:7–8; Matthew 7:16–23; John 6:28–29.

Are good works unimportant or all-important in the Christian’s life? Or something in between?

What role do they have? How would you describe it?

When these passages mention faith (or knowing Jesus or following Him), what kind of faith are they talking about?

How do you think James would respond to any of these verses? “Yeah, but...”? Or, “Exactly”?

In James 2:20–24, there's reference to Abraham as proof of the point. **What's the argument here? How does Abraham prove that "faith without works is useless"?**

Leader: *You might want to reread these verses aloud.*

Background: James refers to a story from Genesis 22. God tells Abraham to take his son, Isaac, up a mountain, to build an altar, and then to sacrifice him. Isaac, you may recall, was a miracle baby, born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Imagine how Abraham would feel about killing him. The story begins by saying that God was testing Abraham. It was quite a test.

Abraham did as instructed, and he got as far as raising the knife to slay his son on the altar, but then God sent an angel to stop him. Abraham passed the test.

How did these actions demonstrate Abraham's faith?

James quotes a verse from Genesis (15:6). **What does that say about Abraham's faith? What does it say about his works?**

How did Abraham's actions in Genesis 22 "fulfill" the statement of Genesis 15:6?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about Abraham's faith in the following Bible passages.

Genesis 12:1–4; Genesis 15:1–6; Romans 4:1–3, 18–24; Hebrews 11:8–9, 17–19

How did Abraham act on his faith?

What exactly was Abraham believing in?

According to the passages in Romans and Hebrews, what are the implications for us? What can we learn about faith and works?

Leader: *Whether or not you use the Go Deeper portions in the lesson, you should read Romans 4 for yourself, so you're clear on these points. Here's a possible sum-up.*

In Romans 4, the apostle Paul uses the exact same verse from Genesis to make what seems to be the opposite point, that Abraham was considered righteous because of his faith, not his works. This has led many people to assume that James and Paul were in sharp disagreement on this matter. But what was Paul talking about, and what is James saying here?

Paul makes the point that, when Abraham was "considered righteous" in Genesis 15, the Jewish law had not yet been given, nor was the ritual of circumcision observed yet. So this code of conduct and ritual that would later define righteousness for the Jews—it didn't exist yet. There was only his faith.

But what kind of faith was it? That's what James wants to know. Was it just believing that God existed? No, it also involved acting on that belief. It was faith with works. But James isn't talking about following rituals or keeping the law. He's talking about letting your faith propel you to feed the hungry. Faith brings you into a relationship with God—He becomes your "friend" (see James 2:23)—and so you do the things that express your love for God.

Do you think it's significant that the faith of Genesis 15 came several chapters before the works of Genesis 22? Does faith generally come first?

Take a look at verse 25. **Why would James go on to talk about Rahab?**

What do you know about Rahab? What was her occupation?

How did she get herself mentioned in the Bible?

Background: Rahab was a prostitute in the Canaanite city of Jericho. She sheltered the Israelite spies and aided in the conquest of the city. In the process, she expressed faith in the God of Israel.

Isn't it a mistake for James to mention a prostitute as an example of good works? Why would he do this?

Abraham and Rahab stand as almost two extremes. In the video Francis gave James' reasoning for including these two examples,

He gives these extremes and he goes, "Everyone, it's about actions." Abraham was about actions, Rahab was about actions...what more do I have to show you and at the very end he just says, "Look as the body apart from the spirit is dead so also faith apart from works is dead."

GO DEEPER

Learn more about Rahab in the following Bible passages.

Joshua 2:1–13; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31

How would you describe Rahab's "statement of faith," especially in Joshua 2:11?

Why do you think she was one of the four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus?

How did her actions demonstrate her faith?

PEEK AT THE GREEK

In verse 26, "spirit" is a translation of the Greek word *pneuma*. This word refers to that which gives life to the body. In some places *pneuma* is translated "breath."

With the meaning of *pneuma* in mind, take another look at verse 26.

How does that affect your understanding of that verse?

LIVE IT OUT

Body and breath go together. They need each other. You can have a body without breath, but that would be a corpse. James says it's the same thing with faith and works. Let's stop trying to rip them apart. When faith is genuine, it results in good works. We trust the Holy Spirit to motivate us. The love of God fills our hearts, so we respond to the needs of those around us.

Now you can get wrapped up in theological debates about whether faith or works is more important, but that misses the point. True faith changes you. Faith flows into works. The two are inseparable.

Earlier we talked about growing things—whether you're a gardener or a farmer or a person with houseplants. Plants grow. That's what they do. Fruit trees bear fruit. And people with genuine faith in Christ put out the fruit of good works. James is not saying that we earn salvation by being good or doing good. He's saying that a fruitless faith is pointless, worthless. It's not really faith.

We should also note a subtle difference between believing that and believing in. James uses the example of believing that there is one God. There are all sorts of ideas and doctrines we can believe about God and about Jesus, but trusting in Christ is the key— putting ourselves in his hands. When we do that, it begins a relationship that radically alters how we live. When we believe in our powerful Lord, like Abraham and Rahab, we will find that our faith is confirmed by our actions.

Leader: *The Bible talks about both kinds of belief—"that" and "in"—but we are called to believe that some pretty amazing things are true: Jesus is Lord, Jesus rose from the dead, etc. It would be hard to believe those doctrines mentally without committing to Christ personally.*

You should also be sensitive about your church's particular theology of faith and works. People always seem worried about hypotheticals. "What if I raised my hand in Vacation Bible School, but then committed a lot of sins?" Your church may have an answer to that, and you should be ready with it. But James (like Paul) leads us beyond the hypotheticals, into the reality of saving faith that results in a changed life.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Evaluation: Talk with God about your own faith. Do you have “faith with works” or “faith without works”? Ask Him to give you the power you need to put your faith into action.

Conversation: Talk with at least one other close Christian friend about this question: Is my faith more on the inside or the outside? Both are good. Both are important. But if you just feel your faith and don't show it, you're out of balance. (It's also possible to tilt the other way, doing stuff for God, but not taking time for personal growth.)

Research: James is very specific about the needs we should be responding to—the needs of widows and orphans, as well as those who need food or clothing. Where do these needs exist in your region? And what are the best ways to help such people? Join with some others in a research projects, and share your findings with this group, or your whole church.

Serving: Can you put yourself on a regular schedule of volunteering with some ministry or charity? Tutoring each week? Staffing a soup kitchen each month? Doing a work day once a quarter? Don't just think about doing these things. Plan something and do it.

Donation: Some ministries are desperate for funds. Challenge your church leaders to support worthy helping ministries, and lead by example by giving your money to support them as well.