

## James 2:14-26 Chapter Study

### INTRODUCTION

A man was walking along a narrow path on a cliff overlooking the beach when the trail gave way and he plunged down several feet.

Just before lurching over the side and onto the ragged rocks 50 feet below, he reached out and caught hold of a scraggly bush.

Dangling in mid-air, one hand on the bush and his grip weakening by the second, he called out, "Is anybody up there?"

A deep melodic and rich voice said, "Yes, I'm here."

The man asked, "Who's that?"

The voice answered back: "the Lord."

The man cried, "Lord, help me!"

The voice replied calmly, "Do you trust Me?"

The man, getting more desperate said, "I trust you completely, Lord!"

The voice said, "Good. Let go of the bush."

The man said, "What?"

Again – "I said, 'Let go of the bush.'"

There was a long pause and then the man said, "Is there anybody else up there?"

We're taking a look at faith and works tonight – and as we do, we come to a passage of the NT that has proven to be a real bone of contention for many generations.

There really is no need for a lot of the debate that's ensured over the years as we'll see because what James has to say here is quite straightforward.

The reason why this passage has been a hotspot is because James seems to be contradicting what Paul writes about salvation.

But there is no contradiction here.

In fact, it's been popular to think that James was upset with Paul's theology and wrote this letter to counter what Paul says.

But a close inspection of the letter reveals that James wrote this long *before* Paul comprised his letters.

As we saw in our first study a few weeks ago, James is probably the very first NT letter to be penned.

So, we need to ask why James wrote this.

James's whole theme was to encourage Jewish Christians to live out their faith and be earnest in their pursuit of spiritual growth and maturity.

As we saw so clearly last week, James well knew the history of the Jewish people and how they rested on their laurels as the covenant people of God to secure their position in heaven.

They thought that just because they had received the Law and Prophets that was enough to guarantee their eternal status as God's favored people.

But hearing and receiving wasn't enough – there must be obedience.

They thought that just because they were the *physical descendants* of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were in.

Yet over and over the prophets had made it clear – hearing wasn't enough; there must be a response – they must obey what they'd heard or it proved they hadn't really heard it at all.

Writing to Jewish believers in Jesus, James was concerned that they don't repeat the same error.

So his letter is one long exhortation to follow through on their faith.

Hearing must be translated into doing.

Look at 1:22

**But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.**

After giving this general command in vs. 21-25 of Chapter 1, he gives some specifics of how to put hearing into doing.

He talks about our speech – as we saw last Sunday.

He talks about charity for the needy and holiness.

He talks about prejudice and favoritism.

Then in Ch. 2, vs. 14-26, he returns to the general subject of hear and doing.

But this time he speaks of it in terms of faith and works.

## CHAPTER 2

**<sup>14</sup>What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?**

The *profit* that James means at the beginning of the verse is spelled out in at the *end* of v. 14.

It's the profit of *salvation*. {hit again for yellow line}

And the *kind of faith* he's asking about at the end of the verse is the kind referred to in the first part – a faith that's void of works. {hit again for red line}

It *is* possible for a person to *say* they have faith and to lack works.

But the question is, is *that the kind of faith* that secures the promise of eternal life?

We need to understand that James is asking a *rhetorical question* here; one he knew *all* his readers would have looked at and answered with a simple and unhesitating "No!"

A faith that lacks works is good for nothing!

His point is to argue for *obedience* in the Christian life.

So he begins by stating the *obvious* and thereby getting his readers to agree with his *theology* before he moves to application.

Having them now all with him, he presses on with an example of how a person can *say* just about anything but their words do not equal reality . . .

**<sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit?**

James's point is this – What real **profit** is a *word of blessing* to the cold and hungry

if all it is is a word.

A cold man is not warmed by a *word*. *Words* do not fill his aching belly. Good will doesn't do *anything* unless it becomes specific action that meets a need.

So merely *saying* nice things to the needy is a waste as far as real help is concerned.

Oh – it may make the one who gives the blessing feel better about him or herself because they had nice thoughts for another person.

They may even go away from seeing the cold and hungry feeling bad for them, and think that *feeling bad* is a sign of their own goodness because they care!

But caring does nothing for the need of a person unless specific action is taken.

James is simply using this as an *example* of how *talk isn't enough* – there must be action!

And so he says in v. 17 –

**17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**

Now, bear in mind that the kind of faith James is referring to here as **dead** and **without profit** is only a “*said*” faith; meaning someone says they believe. Look at v. 14 once again . . .

**14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?**

Then look at the example he gives in vs. 15 & 16 – it's a person who **says** “Be blessed.”

James's concern is to make a distinction between *real* faith and what we may call a merely “*said*” faith.

James refers to it here as “**dead**” faith.

Faith *alone* saves us, but it must be a *living* faith.

The way to know if faith is *living* as opposed to **dead** is by whether or not good works accompany it.

Let me say it this way: Faith alone saves, but not a faith that *is* alone.

That's James's *real* point in this section: He's concerned with identifying *real* faith as opposed to merely *said*, or *dead* faith.

*Real, living faith* results in a lifestyle consistent with what's believed.

If we really believe something, we'll follow through and act on it.

If we truly put our trust and faith in Jesus, our behavior will be altered to conform to that belief.

In vs. 15 & 16, James uses the illustration of helping those in need – but don't get hung up on that as an example of the *premier* kind of good works our faith in Christ ought to produce.

Helping the needy is certainly one indication of Christian charity and a good work God honors.

But James's main point in using *that particular example* was simply to contrast

mere words with action; to make a distinction between a said-dead faith and genuine faith.

Let's make sure we grasp his point in this section before we move on –

Talk isn't enough – there must be follow through into action consistent with the words.

Faith *alone* saves, but not a faith that *is* alone!

Bear in mind that James was writing to Jewish Christians who'd discovered the glory of *salvation by faith*.

They'd come to the exhilaration of freedom from a *works-based* righteousness.

But as is so often the case with people who convert from one religious posture to another, they swung too far in the other direction, to the extreme of thinking that *works didn't matter* at all.

Paul faced the same problem in his ministry.

Paul is known as the *Apostle of Grace* – the one who penned the words in Ephesians 2 -

**<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, <sup>9</sup>not of works, lest anyone should boast.**

Lest he be misunderstood about the role and importance of works, he went on to pen the next verse -

**<sup>10</sup>For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.**

Paul knew how people had twisted the doctrine of Salvation by Faith Alone into a license to sin and dealt with their argument in Romans 6 where he said -

**<sup>1</sup>What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup>Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?**

He then went on in the next verses to declare that the kind of faith that lays hold of God's saving grace results in a changed life; one that resists sin and produces good works.

Listen to how Paul words it in Titus 3:8 . . .

**This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works.**

Contrary to what a lot of people think in a surface reading of Paul and James – these two are not at odds with one another in their view of salvation, faith and works.

They are in complete agreement.

The difference is that Paul is focused on the *ground of salvation* while James is concerned with the *character of faith*.

For Paul – the ground of salvation is the grace of God which is appropriated by faith in Christ as SAVIOR.

For James – *THAT KIND OF FAITH*, the kind that really does lay hold of grace, looks to Christ as LORD, as well as Savior.

[hit 3 times to draw 2 ovals and 1 line]

Let's see how James goes on to develop his idea . . .

**18**But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

James now presents someone who *agrees* with him that faith and works go together.

This person is speaking to someone who thinks works *aren't* proof of genuine faith.

James then makes the point that bare faith, *can't be seen*.

It's an issue of the heart which only God can see.

So how can one *see* faith?

James challenges those who think works aren't essential to faith – and says, “How are you going to make your faith manifest apart from works?”

“I can show you *my* faith in Christ by the fruit of my life.”

“But how are you going to show me your faith in Christ *apart* from works?”

All James is doing here is showing those who have swung too far over into the said-dead faith category that their argument is weak and doesn't hold water.

Even they have to admit that the only way to SHOW faith is through actions.

Now James turns his argument a bit and makes a distinction between mere *intellectual assent* to certain facts and sincere *trust*.

**19**You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!

The thing that marked Judaism and Christianity as fundamentally different from all other religions was it's belief in One God as opposed to many.

We've become so used to this idea, it's now such a central part of Western Civilization that we tend to think of polytheism as archaic and backward.

But what we fail to remember is that the Greco-Roman culture that dominated the intellectual, religious and philosophical fields of that time was given over to the idea of many gods.

To come to and hold on to faith in just one God was a dramatic and bold departure from conventional wisdom.

But James says that while it's a good thing to believe in One God (because it's true) mere belief, a simple intellectual apprehension of the fact that there is just one God isn't enough.

For goodness sake – the demons believe that!

As fallen spiritual beings, they know intimately the fact that there is one holy God whom they've rebelled against and now lie under His judgment.

Fat lot of good their knowledge does them!

It isn't *knowing* something to be true that ultimately matters.

That knowledge has to be translated into *action* consistent with the facts.

Marty's next door neighbor was a research scientist at a aerospace company.

One day this neighbor told Marty that his lab had just discovered a way to produce a superconductor cheaply.

Major industry has been trying to figure this out for years and the breakthrough had finally come.

It meant that that company's stock was going to shoot through the roof.

It was currently trading at only \$5 a share but when the company announced its discovery, the stock would probably rise to over a hundred dollars a share.

That neighbor then invited Marty to go with him to the lab where he showed him the process, and there before his eyes, Marty saw the proof that they had indeed developed a cheap superconductor.

Marty has \$10,000 in savings.

Setting aside the issue of insider trading for a moment, should Marty invest those savings in stock in that aerospace company?

Of course!

If he doesn't, it doesn't change the fact that he *knew* the stock would rise.

Let's say he didn't invest. A week later when the stock had risen to \$25 he could say to himself – "I knew it! I knew all about this before it became public."

Then at lunch one day three weeks later when the stock was at \$75 he could boast to his friends how his neighbor had told him and shown him and that he could have bought shares of that company when they were only \$5 each. He could act very smug in this knowledge, but you and I know that his friends are going to think he was absolutely foolish.

Why? Because he had the *knowledge* but never put it to use!

The knowledge never *profited* him because he never *applied* it.

Many people today *believe* in God.

Recent polls indicate that about 90% of American adults believe in the God of the Bible.

So what?! What good does it do to simply believe that God exists.

A good portion of that 90% think that merely believing in God's existence, that holding on to the *idea* of God is enough to merit them eternal life.

But wait a minute – even the *devil* believes in God.

In fact, he's far more convinced of the reality of God and knows far more *about* Him than most humans.

But that knowledge merits nothing except greater condemnation because he has chosen, in the midst of that knowledge, to *oppose* God.

So, James's point is clear here – agreeing with the facts is not enough!

There must be a *follow through* that's *consistent* with the facts.

**<sup>20</sup>But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?**

The foolish man is the one James is supposing is the other side of the issue here – the one who says he believes something but doesn't live in consistency *with* that belief.

James asks if this guy needs *proof* that what he's saying is true and that workless-faith is dead and ineffectual.

James now refers to Abraham – the Father of the Faithful as an example . . .

**<sup>21</sup>Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?**

Notice how James identifies Abraham – he is "Abraham our father."

To the Jewish mind, Abraham was not just their father in the *physical* sense. He was also their “father in the faith” and it’s in that capacity James is referring to him here.

The specific work of Abraham James is speaking of is recorded in Genesis 22.

God told Abraham to go to Mt. Moriah and offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Now, for those who aren’t familiar with the story – don’t worry; God did not actually intend for Abraham to offer Isaac – it was a test of his faith, not so that God could know if it was genuine or not- God already knew it was.

The test was for *Abraham* to see the depth of his commitment to The Lord.

Also, God was giving Abraham, as the father of the faith, the opportunity to live out a demonstration of what God Himself would do on that very same mount, some 2000 years later.

For Mt. Moriah is also known as Calvary, where The Father offered his Son for the sins of the world.

In any case, James says that Abraham was justified by his radical obedience of being willing to offer up Isaac.

That willingness wasn’t made evident by Abraham sitting in his tent dozens of miles away from Mt. Moriah.

He and Isaac traveled there, hiked up the mount, and then Abraham bound him, and raised the knife.

It was only *then* that God stayed Abraham’s hand.

How could Abraham have gone this far? How could he really have taken this action and been willing to slay his own son at the command of God?

Faith! Faith in God is what enabled him.

You see, Abraham had *more than ample* evidence that God works miracles. Isaac’s birth was a miracle for Abraham was a hundred while Sarah was 90 when he was born!

Up to that point Sarah had been barren – then made doubly barren by the fact of her and Abraham’s advanced age.

God had come to Abraham and told him that Sarah would conceive and bear a son and that through *that son* would come more descendants than the stars in the sky or the sand on the shore.

When God told him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, as of yet Isaac had no children.

So Abraham reasoned that God’s word & promise cannot be broken and that He will even accomplish the seemingly impossible in order that His word not be broken.

So, even if the knife fell and pierced Isaac’s flesh, God could raise him from the dead.

The writer of Hebrews puts it like this . . . [Hebrews 11:17-19]

**<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, <sup>18</sup>of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” <sup>19</sup>concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.**

James’s point in using this story from the life of Abraham was to show that Abraham’s faith went *way beyond* even simple good works to absolute trust in God to work miracles.

**22**Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?

The word perfect means “complete.”

Abraham’s faith in God didn’t hesitate when God told him to take action on that faith.

James’s point is that faith in God always leads to action – faith and works go together.

Faith is the sun, works are the sunbeams.

Faith is *inhaling* the life and truth of God – works are *exhaling* His life and truth.

Faith is the hand inside a work-glove.

The glove without a hand is dead and empty.

But when the hand is in the glove, it’s the glove that’s seen and that touches the things of earth.

**23**And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*” And he was called the friend of God.

What’s interesting about James’s quoting Genesis 15 at this point is that it *predates* the events of v. 21 by many years.

Let me read Genesis 15 [vs. 1-6]

**1**After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

**2**But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus?” **3**Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!”

[Next slide]

**4**And behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” **5**Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

**6**And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

This passage, Genesis 15, takes place *many* years before the events of chapter 21.

And notice on what basis Abraham is declared righteous.

It’s on the basis of his faith. Faith in what?

Faith in God’s promise – ultimately, faith in God, whom Abraham had come to put his confidence in as trustworthy!

James *quotes* Genesis 15:6 and says in v. 23 that it was the events of Genesis 22 that FULFILLED them.

Note that, because its *critical* to resolving the dilemma that bothers so many people about this passage.

James understands Abraham’s *faith* as being fulfilled or made complete in his work of offering Isaac.

James *agrees* that what God looked at and declared as the basis of Abraham’s justification and righteousness was his faith in God.



But that faith was *proven* when he took the knife in hand on Mt. Moriah. So, while Abraham in himself was made righteous by faith, that faith was proven by works.

Now James sets the hook – and delivers the line that has proven to be the crux of the problem so many have with this passage -

**24**You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

The problem with this verse is this – if we had ONLY this verse, we would indeed be faced with a problem.

For Paul is crystal clear in Romans 3 that a man is *not justified by works* but by faith alone.

Yet this verse seems, at first reading to be a flat contradiction of that.

In fact, it was this verse in particular that moved Martin Luther to call the book of James an epistle of straw.

Luther thought James ought to be excised from the NT!

Such conclusions are *reactionary* and don't consider the *context* of what James is saying here.

As I mentioned, this verse, if taken in isolation does appear to fly in the face of Paul's theology of grace.

But this verse is not alone; it's part of the wider argument of vs. 14-26 and can only be understood in that setting.

In fact, the verse itself shows that it is part of a larger argument.

It begins – “**You see then . . .**”

What we've seen, and the conclusion James wants us to draw, especially in light of the immediate context of Abraham's example is that works are the justification or proof of faith.

Abraham wasn't justified in a legal or forensic sense on the basis of works but on the basis of faith in God.

James has just made that clear by quoting Genesis 15:6!

What was justified by works was Abraham's faith!

Friends, keep the *wider* context in mind – James is contrasting mere said-faith with genuine saving faith.

You have two guys, one who says he believes but has no works to back it up and another who says he believes and proves it by his works.

James presents Abraham as an example of the latter.

In v. 24, James says that it's the one who has *works* who claim is justified!

Let me use this example:

Let's say we bring two men up here and they both claim to be mathematicians.

We give them each a piece of chalk and a chalkboard and set them a challenging calculus problem.

One man sets to work factoring the proper equations and covers the board with complex formulas until eventually he calculates the answer and circles it.

The other man draws a picture of a doggie chasing a cat and some stick figures. Who stands justified? The one who proved his claim!

This is exactly what James is saying in v. 24!

He is NOT saying that Abraham was justified in the sense of his standing before **GOD** by works.

But his works do justify him before **MAN** – for faith can only be made evident by works!

James now uses another illustration -

**25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way?**

James moves from Abraham to Rahab!

You could not find two more different persons! [Guzik]

Abraham was a Jew; Rahab was a Gentile.

Abraham was a godly man, but Rahab was a sinful woman, a harlot.

Abraham was the friend of God, while Rahab, a Canaanite, belonged to the enemies of God.

What did they have in common?

Even though they were so radically different, both exercised saving faith in God.

And that faith moved them both to take specific action.

**26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.**

James likens the body to faith and the spirit to works.

Though this last illustration may seem backwards, the point is that these two things go together and ought not be separated.

If you take one away from the other, you've done irreparable damage to them.

It's probably easier for us to think of faith like the *spirit*, since in and of itself it's unseen, while works are like the body.

But James's reversal of these images in the last verse is what helps us realize his argument has been one seamless whole from v. 14 all the way to v. 26.

You see, it's *genuine* or *living* versus *dead* faith that he's been concerned with in this passage.

And it's far easier to think of the *body* as dead than the spirit.

His point is that faith and works go together and cannot be separated.

And in this Paul and James are in 100% agreement.

## CONCLUSION

There is a real danger in studying this passage!

The danger is not coming to a works-based righteousness because James doesn't go anywhere near teaching that.

The danger is that the supposed contradiction between James and Paul can end up allowing our study of this passage to degenerate into a purely theological examination of the passage in which we fail to take heed to what James is saying here.

Let's not miss his point!

Faith that does not manifest itself in good works of obedience to God is no faith at all!

We may be saved by faith alone but not a faith that is alone.

It is not just bare belief that saves us but faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And to put it as bluntly as possible, anyone who genuinely believes in Christ will live a lifestyle that moves away from sin toward holiness.

The proof of the new birth is new life!

Anyone who says they believe in God but whose lifestyle continues in sin is – as

John makes so abundantly clear in his first epistle – fooling themselves!

Genuine faith is more than mental agreement with the facts.

Genuine, saving faith includes abiding, obedient trust in Jesus as both Savior & Lord!