

## **International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes**

**Lesson Text: James 2:14-26**

**Lesson Title: Show Your Faith by Your Works**

### **Introduction**

The relationship between faith and works is an important subject in James' epistle. Ten times in James 2:14-26, "faith" and "works" are mentioned together. Although James' teaching on this subject is clear, there still exists much controversy in religious circles concerning the connection between faith and works. People have a tendency to lean toward one side or the other. On the one hand, there are those who overemphasize faith while ignoring the place of works. Some would call that "easy believism." People who lean in that direction believe someone can possess genuine saving faith without a change of life or evident productive work. On the other hand, some people overemphasize works and believe that a sinner must earn his salvation. This is commonly known as "salvation by works." Good works are not the requirement for salvation, but they are the result.

The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches that salvation is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). However, the Bible also clearly and repeatedly teaches that genuine saving faith will always result in good works (Matthew 7:21; 25:31-46; Ephesians 2:10).

James wrote this portion of his epistle because he was concerned about the different ways people were living out their claims to faith in Christ. People who have a problem with the truth James writes in this section are often reacting to things he didn't write. James, in his writing, is contrasting "faith without works" which is unproductive and "faith that works" which is productive. James is not writing about "faith in works." Works do not save!

### **Faith Without Works is Unproductive (James 2:14-20)**

As you read James' epistle, he writes in a way that indicates that while he is talking to the "brethren," someone interrupts him with a question or a comment. That is indicated in the words, "though a man say" (v.14), "one of you say" (v.16), "Yea, a man may say" (v.18) and "O vain man" (v.20). These interruptions make for interesting and enlightening truth from James.

Verse 14

"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?"

As James is addressing the church at large, "a man" interrupts him and seems to say that "he has faith" or personal trust in the Christ of Christian faith. Having heard this man's declaration, James asks two questions. First, "what does it profit" if "a man" says with his mouth that he "hath faith" and has no working proof? What is the "profit" or use of such a statement? What good is it to just say you are a Christian without the works or change of life to authenticate the profession? Second, James asks, "Can faith save him?" What James is asking is "Can a faith that is just verbal actually save a man from sin? The order of the language "can faith save him" is written in a way that the answer is an obvious no. James point is that when a man confesses that he has placed his trust in the Christ of the Christian faith and there are no demonstrating deeds, that man has no biblical grounds to claim he is "saved."

#### Verse 15-16

"If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?"

James is not attempting to prove his point but rather illustrate the truth of verse 14. He describes "a brother or sister" who is "naked, and destitute of daily food." He is describing a brother or sister in Christ who is in need. The word "brother" is *adelphos*, and "sister" is *adelphē*, meaning a "man or woman in the faith." The word "naked" means "in tattered clothes." "Destitute of daily food" refers to someone who was not receiving the basic nourishment of food needed for daily life.

James says if you see "a brother or sister" in this condition of need and your response is "depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled" and you do not "give them those things which are needful to the body," you're a fake! To say, "be ye warmed and filled" is sarcasm. The word "filled" is the Greek word *chortazo*, and refers to "a feed lot." It means the professing Christian who saw a hungry brother or sister in Christ would say, "Go eat like an animal until you can't eat any more." It is mockery!

"What doth it profit" is James' question. He is asking, "What is the advantage to that kind of approach to life while claiming to have faith in Christ." To do nothing in the face of human need and destitution except to speak words of sympathy

benefits neither the ones in need nor the one who claims to be a Christian but his profession doesn't line up with his actions. The Apostle John said, *"But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him"* (1 John 3:17).

#### Verse 17

"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."

Genuine "faith" will never be just a verbal profession. Genuine "faith" will never be "alone." It will be accompanied by "works." If "faith" has no "works," then that "faith" is "dead." The word "dead" is the Greek word *nekros*, meaning "lifeless, breathed its last breath."

Obviously, Christians don't face the situation James described in verses 15-16 every day. However, when we do, it is test of the genuineness of our faith. It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies can never be alone.

#### Verse 18

"Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works."

"Yea, a man may say" is James' reference to another interruption while he is speaking. James is speaking here about someone who might respond to what he has just taught by saying, "Okay James, you have faith, I have works." It's as if someone told James that some people are believers and others were doers, or that some people demonstrate their relationship to Christ by what they believe while others demonstrate their faith by what they do.

In response to this challenge to James' teaching, James says, "I am manifesting my faith by the way I live, and you say you can manifest your faith by believing only without any works." James says, "I challenge you to show me how else one can manifest his faith without works."

The word "by" is the Greek word *ek*, which means "emerging out of or emerging from." James was saying that "works" emerge from true "faith."

#### Verse 19

"Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble."

James now addresses a man who had challenged his teaching concerning faith and works. "Thou" is most likely a reference to a Jewish believer. James wants him and all his readers to know that just "believing" or giving intellectual recognition to God is not sufficient for salvation. The individual challenging James "believed that there is one God." Jewish belief was always centered on belief in "one God" (Deuteronomy 6:4). To confess there was "one God" was the great confession of Judaism. By the time of James the confession of "one God" was so sacred that it was believed that if you said it, it prolonged your life. It had become a superstitious confession. It had become almost like the "repeat after me" prayers for salvation that are so popular today. Certainly the Bible teaches that the sinner must "*confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus...*" (Romans 10:9) but there is no magical set of words alone that will save anyone.

Sarcastically, James said, "If you say "there is one God; thou doest well, or, good for you." But how does that make you any better than the "devils." James insists that even the demons of hell know and acknowledge the existence of "one God." Unlike many today who claim to be atheists or agnostics, "the devils" believe in the existence of God (Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:41). Demons not only "believe," or know that "one God" exists, they "tremble." The word means "shudder." They "bristle up" like hair standing up on end when they recognize the existence of God.

### Verse 20

"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?"

For the second time in four verses, James says "faith without works is dead." "Dead" means there is no vital signs, no pulse rate, no heartbeat, and no life."

*Teachers note: I don't know about you, but I want a living faith! When I stand before God I don't want my life to be just mere intellectual knowledge of Jesus Christ. I want more than an outward confession with no inward reality.*

*Question: How can you know if your faith is real? First, there must be a crisis of conviction that you are a sinner to be followed by a confession of unbelief and Jesus Christ as Lord. Faith begins with a point in time when the sinner confesses that Jesus Christ died on the cross, was buried, and on the third day arose from the grave. Second, that crises of conviction and conversion is followed by a process of*

*lifelong demonstration of the deeds that validate the reality of the saving experience.*

### **Faith With Works is Productive (James 2:21-26)**

Having challenged his readers to understand that faith without works is unproductive, James now provides two Old Testament illustrations to prove that real faith is demonstrated by the production of fruit. James writes about the faithful patriarch, Abraham, and a former godless harlot, Rahab. While these two individuals were worlds apart they both demonstrate that saving faith produces visible works. What James is declaring here is that faith does work!

#### Verse 21-23

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God."

There is much said in the Bible about the great patriarch of faith, "Abraham." "Abraham" was the embodiment of faith for those to whom James wrote this letter. "Abraham" is the first person in scripture whose faith is explicitly mentioned. You can conclude that Adam and Eve had faith, that Enoch and Noah had faith, but it is first said about Abraham that he "believed" or trusted in God and God counted it as "righteousness" or a right standing with God.

Because of Abraham's belief and resulting obedience, he was "called the Friend of God." Since Abraham's faith was genuine and proved by his resulting obedience, he entered a wonderful fellowship and intimacy with Almighty God.

James' purpose in using Abraham as an example of faith and works is to convince his readers of how faith and works work together. "Wrought" is the Greek word *sunergeo*, literally meaning "a working together." It is used of things that must work together in order to demonstrate the reality of both. If you separate faith from works or works from faith you will never understand either.

James gives us two events in the life of "Abraham" that covers a period of 40 years of time. By choosing these two events, James is able to show that "Abraham believed God" (v.23) and it was "imputed unto him for righteousness" or "put on his account."

First, the events in verse 23 took place 40 years before the events in verses 21-22. Verse 23 is speaking about how God saved Abraham by faith alone and how God confirmed to Abraham that he would have a seed as recorded in Genesis 15:1-6. Although Abraham had been called out of Ur of the Chaldees in Genesis 11-12, it was in Genesis 15:1-6 where it is first said, *"And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness."* When Abraham "believed God" by faith alone, God said, "Abraham is in a right standing with me."

In James 2:23, Abraham is declared "righteous" because he believed the word of God. In James 2:21, the word "justified" means "shown to be righteous." It is one thing in Genesis 15:1-3 to inwardly say, "I believe your promise God." That's inward, that's personal, and that belongs to the faith of the heart. It's entirely something different 40 years later in Genesis 22 to demonstrate that by being willing to put a knife to the throat of your only son at the word of God.

Second, the events in verses 21-22 took place 40 years after the events recorded in Genesis 15:1-6, when God first declared Abraham as "righteous." The event of the offering of Isaac upon the altar is recorded in Genesis 22. When James asked, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered Isaac his son upon the altar," he was asking, "Didn't Abraham prove his relationship to God by his obedient works in offering up his son?" The simple meaning of what James is saying is that "Abraham" had a working faith. The fruit of "Abraham's" faith is that he "offered up" his only son "Isaac" as God commanded. "Abraham" was "justified" or proved before men that he was right with God "by" the "work" of offering his son upon the altar. When man looked at "Abraham" they knew his belief and profession of faith in God was real.

#### Verse 24

"Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."

The faith of Abraham was declared in heaven in Genesis 15:1-6. That is faith. The faith of Abraham was demonstrated on earth in Genesis 22. That is works. Abraham showed his faith declared in heaven by his works demonstrated on earth. Because of James' illustration of Abraham, he says, "Ye seen then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only." It is not that salvation requires faith plus works, but that works are the consequent outgrowth and completion of genuine faith.

Is James contradicting the Apostle Paul who said, *"What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were*

*justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Romans 4:1-3)?* The answer is no. James wrote his letter as early as A.D. 48, and Paul did not write the Roman letter until at least A.D. 58. James and Paul were coming from two different perspectives. Paul was writing to Judaizers who believed that one had to add works of the law to faith in order to receive salvation. James, on the other hand, was writing to people who claimed to have faith but actually they only had an intellectual acknowledgement. Paul's teaching and James' teaching do not contradict.

### Verse 25

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

James presents his second case study by referencing, Rahab (Joshua 2:1-3; 6:17-25; Hebrews 11:31). There is very little said in the Bible about the godless harlot, Rahab. "Likewise" means James is going to make the same point with Rahab as he made with Abraham.

"Rahab" was "justified by works, when she had received the messengers" (Joshua 2:9-11). Was Rahab saved by "faith?" The answer is yes. She is recorded in the list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:31. Matthew, in his genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ said that not only was Jesus the son of Abraham, but He was also through the lineage of Rahab (Matthew 1:5).

In Joshua 2:9-11, this pagan harlot said unto the spies, *"I know that the Lord hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you."* That was Rahab's confession of faith. Rahab's salvation was not based on her merits or character, she lived in a doomed city, practiced a sinful profession and lied. Nevertheless, she turned to God in faith and he declared her to be righteous.

Rahab's faith was in her confession. Rahab demonstrated her faith by her works as recorded in Joshua 2:4-6, *"And the woman took the two men, and hid them, and said thus, There came men unto me, but I wist not whence they were: And it came to pass about the time of shutting of the gate, when it was dark, that the men went out: whither the men went I wot not: pursue after them quickly; for ye shall overtake them. But she had brought them up to the roof of the house, and hid them with the stalks of flax, which she had laid in order upon the roof."* Her actions may

seem strange to us and somewhat elementary but James' point is simply this, faith works!

Again, the word "wrought" in verse 22 means "a working together." What Rahab confessed with her mouth worked with her actions to demonstrate and validate the reality of her faith.

### Verse 26

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

James concludes his teaching on faith and works with a powerful and striking analogy. When a human "body" is "without the spirit" of life given by the breath of God, the result is "death." In like manner, a "faith" that is nothing more than intellectual knowledge of the Lord "without works is dead also."

For the third time in this section, James says, "so faith without works is dead also." Faith is lifeless, has no vital signs, and is breathless without works.

### **Conclusion**

The nature of saving faith demands that good works follow regardless of the one who is saved. Just as salvation is for everyone, the truth of faith and works applies to everyone. In James' illustration, faith and works applied to both Jews (Abraham) and Gentiles (Rahab). It applied to both male (Abraham) and female (Rahab). It applied to two different lifestyles, Abraham (a religious moon worshipper) and Rahab (a pagan prostitute).

As you consider the truth concerning faith and works, it may be a good time to *"Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith..."* (2 Corinthians 13:5). If your profession of faith has never resulted in works of righteousness then call upon the Lord for saving grace. If your faith is real, ask God for a balance between your trust in Him and your obedience to Him. Ask yourself how your actions are a true expression of genuine faith.

*"This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men"* (Titus 3:8).

Amen.

