

Faith That Works



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 1

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: James 2:14–26; Romans 3:27, 28; Titus 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:2; Romans 4:1–5; Joshua 2:1–21.

MEMORY VERSE: “The body without the spirit is dead. In the same way, faith without good works is dead” (James 2:26, NIV).

HE WAS A SUCCESSFUL DOCTOR AND AN ELDER IN A BIG, WELL-KNOWN CHURCH OF SEVERAL HUNDRED MEMBERS. He was an important giver to the church's big projects. His donations encouraged others to give more money to the church. The doctor was also a great preacher. When the pastor was gone he spoke. And everyone looked forward to his messages, which were deep, heartfelt, and spiritual.

Then one day the truth came out. The doctor's absence at church one Sabbath was not because he was on vacation, as many had thought. Instead, he was found dead in his beachfront condo from an overdose of drugs.

More shocking was that in his bedroom were dozens of pornographic videos and magazines. The church felt bad, especially the young people, who had looked up to him as a role model. We must leave all judgment in God's hands. But the doctor's actions made people wonder if his faith was real.

The point? We are saved by faith. But we cannot separate faith and works in the life of a Christian. It is an important but often misunderstood truth found in the book of James.

DEAD FAITH (James 2:14)

How do we understand James 2:14 in comparison¹ with the teaching of salvation by faith alone? Read James 2:15–17; compare² Romans 3:27, 28 and Ephesians 2:8, 9.

Faith without works. James 2:15, 16 gives a very clear picture of this kind of phony faith. Obedience in the book of James depends on relationships. So, how *do* we relate to a brother or sister in the church who is in need? Words are not enough. We cannot simply say, “Go in peace. God will provide [take care of you],” when God has given us the tools to help that brother or sister.

Of course, needs can be endless. And we cannot meet them all. But there is a principle (important rule) called “the power of one.” We are the hands and feet of Jesus. And we can help others *one person at a time*. In fact, that is how Jesus usually worked. In Mark 5:22–34, a man whose daughter was dying asked Him for help. On the way, a woman came from behind and touched Jesus’ robe. After the healing, Jesus could have gone on and the woman would have left rejoicing. But Jesus knew that she needed more than physical healing. So, He stopped and took the time so that she could learn to be a witness for Jesus, to both share and to receive. Then *after* He had helped her (and not before), He said the same words found in James 2:16, NIV: “ ‘Go in peace’ ” (Mark 5:34, NIV).

When we recognize a need but do nothing about it, we have missed an opportunity to live out our faith. By doing so, our faith gets a little weaker and a little dead. This is because faith without works dies. James describes it even more clearly: faith is dead already. If it were alive the works would be there. If they are not, what good is it? At the end of verse 14, James asks a question about this kind of workless and worthless faith. It comes across far more strongly in the Greek language than it does in most translations: “*That* faith cannot save him, can it?” The answer James expects us to give is clearly “No.”

How can we learn to better show our faith through our works while protecting ourselves from the false idea that our works save us?



We are the hands and feet of Jesus.

DEFINITIONS

1. comparison—showing likeness and difference.
2. compare—show how two or more things are the same or different.

SAVING FAITH (James 2:18)

Read James 2:18. What is the important point James is making? How do we show our faith by our works?

James uses a common language tool in case a person disagrees. The person who disagrees tries to argue that as long as a person has faith or works, he or she is fine. But James is trying to say that Christians cannot hope to be saved by faith if there are no works that come with it: “Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (verse 18, NKJV).

The important point is that not just any faith will save. True faith, *saving* faith, is shown by good works. In the same way, works are only *good* works if they come from faith. Faith and works cannot be separated. Like two sides of a coin, one cannot do without the other. Also like a coin, one side is the head and the other the tail. Faith comes first and then leads the way to works.

Consider Paul’s attitude (feeling) toward works in Ephesians 2:10; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Timothy 5:25; and Titus 2:14. Why are good works so important?

Paul was not against good works. He was against works as a way to salvation (see Galatians 2:16). In fact, Paul said that those who depend on works of the law to be saved are under a curse. This is because no one who tries to be saved by keeping the law really succeeds in keeping it (Galatians 3:10). Obedience is possible only through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“If man cannot, by any of his good works, deserve salvation, then it must be wholly of grace.³ Grace is received by man as a sinner because he receives and believes in Jesus. It is all a free gift. Justification [forgiveness] by faith is placed beyond any doubt. And all this argument is ended when all agree that fallen man in his good works can never earn eternal life for himself.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, page 20.

Why should the great news that we cannot work our way to heaven encourage us, out of a love for God, to do all the good works that we can?



True faith, saving faith, is shown by good works.

DEFINITIONS

3. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

THE “FAITH” OF DEMONS (James 2:19)

If works are absent, there is only one other way to “prove” that one’s faith is real: by religious beliefs. If I believe the right things, then I must have faith, right?

Read 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Timothy 2:4; James 5:19, 20; 1 Peter 1:22; and 1 John 3:18, 19. What do these verses tell us about how important knowing truth is?

There is no question that a knowledge of truth is important. But that knowledge is not enough to prove that a person has saving faith.

What warning is given to us in James 2:19 about a false understanding of what true faith is?



Faith that does not change how we act is useless.

The most basic statement of faith in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (NASB, 1995). It is known as the *Shema* because this is the Hebrew word it begins with. This verse clearly shows belief in one God. Every other biblical teaching flows from this important truth.

But even the demons believe this truth. In fact, they *know* it! And yet, what good does it do them? They shake with fear in God’s presence. They did it when Jesus commanded them to come out of their victims (Mark 3:11; Mark 5:7).

A faith that does not change how we act is useless. It is the same kind of faith that demons have when they are very active in deceiving us with false doctrines and lies. As with Israel at the time of Jesus, demons will encourage people to believe their false ideas when these people desire to hold onto impure and unrighteous behavior. “The Holy Spirit clearly says that in the last days some people will leave the faith. They will follow spirits that will fool them. They will believe things that demons will teach them” (1 Timothy 4:1, NIV).

Faith must be shown in our lives. Or it is not saving faith. It is really “the faith of demons.” Such a faith will not save us any more than it will save them.

ABRAHAM'S FAITH (James 2:21–24)

Read James 2:21–24 and compare it with Romans 4:1–5, 22–24. How is the faith of Abraham described in these verses? And on what is justification (forgiveness and cleansing) based?

Interestingly, both James and Paul quote Genesis 15:6. But they seem to arrive at different conclusions. According to James, Abraham was justified (made holy) by works. But Paul seems, in Romans 4:2, to deny this possibility (compare verse 24).

But Romans 4 deals with whether circumcision⁴ is necessary for justification. The question was whether Gentiles (non-Jews) had to become Jews in order to be saved (Romans 3:28–30). Paul shows that Abraham's *faith* was the basis of Abraham's justification. This is because Abraham believed even before he was circumcised.⁵ Abraham was circumcised later as an example of his inward faith (Romans 4:9–11). But works alone, even circumcision, are not enough for justification. This is because only those "who also walk in the steps of the faith [of] our father Abraham" (Romans 4:12, NKJV) will be justified.

Is Paul's point really so different from that of James's? Paul even goes on to use the same "proof" of Abraham's faith that James does (read Romans 4:17–21). Abraham believed that God could bring Isaac back to life because He "gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist [live]" (verse 17, NASB; compare Hebrews 11:17–19). Paul also explains that saving faith is being "absolutely [so] sure that God had [has] the power to do what he had [has] promised" (Romans 4:21, NIV). In summary, faith that trusts God to keep His promises and obediently depends on His Word is saving faith. These works are not "works of law" but "works of faith."

Many feel that faith *and* works are very important. But even this separates the two, at least in some way. True faith is "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6, NKJV). Good works are not just the outward sign of faith. They are the *outworking* of faith. Abraham's faith in the God who created all life led him to obey God in offering up his only son, Isaac. According to James, it is by obedience that faith is made perfect.

What is your own experience with how works (or its lack) influence your faith?

DEFINITIONS

4. circumcision—the act of removing foreskin from a male's sex organ.

5. circumcised—having the foreskin of the male's sex organ removed.

THE FAITH OF RAHAB (James 2:25)



Just as the body is a corpse without the breath of life, faith without works is dead.

“Didn’t [did not] God make even Rahab the prostitute⁶ right with him? That’s [that is] because of what she did. She gave the spies a place to stay. Then she sent them off in a different direction” (James 2:25, NIV). Read Joshua 2:1–21. How do we understand this example, keeping in mind that salvation is by faith alone?

According to Hebrews 11:31, the people of Jericho did not believe. Most modern translations describe them as being “disobedient.” The people of Jericho knew about Israel’s important victories over the Midianites and the Amorites. So, they were well aware of the power of Israel’s God. God’s judgment on Israel at Baalpeor taught the people in Jericho of His holiness. They also knew that He hated idol worship and sins. “All these events were known to the people of Jericho. Many of them shared Rahab’s belief, but they refused to obey it.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Forefathers and Leaders] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 492.

Rahab was saved, but not because of her dishonesty. She believed in the true God. And she acted on that faith by protecting the spies that Joshua sent out. There were also other conditions: she obeyed the messengers’ direction to hang the scarlet cord in her window. This reminds us of the blood sprinkled around the doors of the Israelite homes at the time of their Passover freedom (read Exodus 12:21–24). While far from perfect, Rahab’s life is a model of faith that shows how real God’s forgiveness and grace are for everyone willing to step out in faith and to trust God with the results.

DEFINITIONS

6. prostitute—a person who has sex with someone in exchange for pay.

7. harlot—a woman who has sex with someone in exchange for money.

Read James 2:26. How does this verse show the relationship between faith and works?

The body is only a corpse without the breath of life. In the same way faith without works is dead. Without real faith any “obedience” we might try to give would lead only to “dead works” (Hebrews 6:1; Hebrews 9:14). They are meaningless in the sight of God.

A harlot⁷ saved by faith? If that were the only example of salvation by faith we had, what false ideas could we have from it? But what hope can you take from her story for yourself?

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “When self is put away, then you can get a new and rich experience. You will see your own imperfections as you lie low at the foot of the cross. As you see the perfections of Christ, self will feel unimportant in comparison with Him.

“Christ will seem to the person who studies Him a perfect example of lovely character [goodness; a holy life]. Then His example will be impressed upon mind and heart. And it will be shown in the character [thoughts; feelings; actions]. His mind will impress the heart, and it will be shown in the life. Come to Jesus in your need. Pray in living faith. Hold fast to His powerful hand. Believe, only believe, and you will see the salvation of God. If you are willing to be taught, God will teach you. If you are willing to be led, He will lead you to fountains of living waters.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*⁸ to *Southern Africa*, page 26.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Read James 2 in one quick sitting. What is the important message there for those who trust only in the perfect character of Christ for their salvation?
- ② Some argue that James talks about faith and works without discussing what Paul has said on the subject. They say, we should interpret James on his own terms. But what is wrong with that kind of thinking? Why is it important to keep in mind what other verses say about faith and works? In fact, during the Protestant movement (1400s to 1700s), Catholic thinkers often used the book of James to defend the Roman Church against the Protestants. Why does this show us how important it is to build our doctrines (church teachings; beliefs) on all the verses we have with us?
- ③ It is often said that faith and works should be kept in “balance.” Having studied this lesson, do you agree with that thinking? Discuss your answer with others in the class.
- ④ James and the rest of the New Testament do not criticize Abraham’s failure of faith in connection with Ishmael, nor Rahab’s lying. Why? What does this fact teach us about what it means to be covered by Christ’s righteousness?

DEFINITIONS

8. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.