

August 16, 2020

Lesson 11

FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: "Just Do It"
YOUTH TOPIC: Is Your Faith Dead or Alive?

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Faith without Works
Is Dead
CHILDREN'S TOPIC: A Working Faith

DEVOTIONAL READING
Matthew 18:23-35

ADULT/YOUTH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26
PRINT PASSAGE: James 2:14-26
KEY VERSE: James 2:26

CHILDREN

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26
PRINT PASSAGE: James 2:14-26
KEY VERSE: James 2:18b

James 2:14-26—KJV

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

15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

16 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?

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

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.

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

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

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

James 2:14-26—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.

18 But 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.

19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

23 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.

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

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

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

22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.

24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

25 In 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?

26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE: Some people make bold claims about the standards by which they live, but their actions deny those claims. How can we tell when someone is genuine? James says that the one who has faith will demonstrate that faith by his or her works, as did Abraham and Rahab.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Compare and contrast a faith that is no more than empty talk with a faith that is proved by actions.
2. Reflect on the power of Abraham’s and Rahab’s examples of faith in action.
3. Commit to demonstrating faith with tangible works.

AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—James alludes to Genesis 15:6 when he says the Scripture reads, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (verse 23, NRSV).

—Verse 19 (NIV), “You believe that there is one God,” refers to one of the most basic tenets of the Jewish faith. See Deuteronomy 6:4.

—The actions of Rahab are recounted in Joshua 2:1-21.

—Abraham and Rahab are both cited as examples of people with faith in Hebrews 11 (verses 8-19 and verse 31, respectively).

—Faith must be put into action.

—The examples of Abraham’s and Rahab’s actions undergird faith in action.

—The question “What good is it to believe something is right to do and not do it?” echoes the binding faith with works.

—The Scripture teaches that we show faith by helping meet the needs of others who are suffering or struggling.

—In this Scripture (2:18), faith is demonstrated by doing good deeds.

Teachers of CHILDREN

- James argued against an incomplete definition of *faith*.
- James and Paul seem to disagree on how faith is expressed.
- Mere confession of faith accomplishes nothing.

—James proclaims that even the demons know there is only one God.

- The biblical account of a faithful believer is expressed in Abraham’s righteousness and whom God called friend (2:23).
- Rahab was not a believer but demonstrated faith through actions when she protected the spies (see Joshua 2).

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

In the New Testament, four men bear the name *James*. The author of the epistle of James could not have been the apostle James (son of Zebedee), who died in AD 44, since the book is believed to be from a later time. The other two people who bore the name *James* did not have the status, the respect, or the authority that the writer of this letter seems to have possessed.

Jesus had several brothers, and James was probably the eldest if we are to go by the order of the list in Matthew 13:55. In John 7:2-5, we see that Jesus’ brothers did not believe in Him as Messiah at first. James was most likely included among the doubting brothers. Later, he became a key member of the church, being active in major roles and incidents. He was one of the few people to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:7). As seen earlier, James was a key figure among Jerusalem Christians (see Acts 15:13). Paul referred to him as a “pillar” of the church (see Galatians 2:9). After the apostle Paul’s conversion, he went to see James in Jerusalem (see Galatians 1:19). On his last visit to Jerusalem, Paul also went to pay James a visit (see Acts 21:18). After Peter’s rescue from prison, he told his friends to inform James (see Acts 12:17). There are other references to James in the New Testament. He was eventually martyred sometime around AD 62.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

We already know that the book of James was written to Jewish Christians and focuses on happenings in the synagogue and among Jewish Christians. In an era when people’s lives and living were dominated by separation and segregation of various sorts, James admonished Christians to keep this out of the church. He admonished the Jewish Christians in particular to treat everyone the same: “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality” (James 2:1, NKJV).

This was a time when the world was largely subdivided like ours is today. People were categorized on the basis of background, religion, financial status, and political affiliation. Unlike today, when many people generally consider it wrong to be partial, it was normal and socially acceptable to be partial in those days. Preferences were based on whether a person was Jew or Gentile, slave or free, rich or poor, Greek or Barbarian. The church was participating in that unjust system, and James wrote against such practices in the church. James recognized that a key part of Jesus’ goal was to unite humanity, making us all one (see Ephesians 2:14-15). People were amazed at the unity and oneness

in the early church. James's letter shows that this oneness did not just fall upon them. Key elders like James had to teach it to the early Christians.

In James 2:2-4 NKJV), we see human prejudice specifically identified: "For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, 'You sit here in a good place,' and say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or, 'Sit here at my footstool,' have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"

Based on all of this, James tells us that we must treat each and every person impartially. In James 2:12, we are encouraged to be merciful in our deeds. James 2:24 (NRSV) sheds additional light regarding how we should treat each other: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."

PROMINENT CHARACTER(S) IN THE LESSON

James: the author of the book of James. He was a brother of our Lord, Jesus.

KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

Believe(st) (verse 19)—Greek: *pisteuó* (pist-yoo'-o): have faith in; trust in; entrust.

Dead (verse 17)—Greek: *nekros* (nek-ros'): lifeless; subject to death; a corpse.

Faith (verse 14)—Greek: *pistis* (pis'-tis): belief; trust; confidence; fidelity; faithfulness.

Peace (verse 16)—Greek: *eiréné* (i-ray'-nay): peace of mind; quietness; rest.

Save (verse 14)—Greek: *sózó* (sode'-zo): to heal, preserve; rescue.

Show (verse 18)—Greek: *deiknyō* (dāk-nū'-ō): to show, exhibit, demonstrate, point out, "shew" (KJV).

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

I. Introduction

- A. Don't Be Partial; Be Merciful
- B. Biblical Background

II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture

- A. Live Faith versus Dead Faith (James 2:14-17)
- B. Employed Faith versus Unemployed Faith (James 2:18-22)
- C. The Just Shall Live by Faith (James 2:23-26)

III. Concluding Reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Don't Be Partial; Be Merciful

In Matthew 18:23-35 and in James 2:14-26, we see the importance of being merciful and acting as Christians. The book of James tells us to move away from partiality and favoritism as Christians. The smallest things count, and we are called to refrain from showing more love to some people simply because they are richer than others. We should not pay less attention to the needs of some others because they are less glamorous.

As God has given to us, we should also give to others. Also, as God has forgiven us, we should also forgive. If God did not consider how sinful we were when He forgave us, then

we should not hurt others or show favoritism because they are not as advanced as we would prefer. Jesus sets for us a great example of how we should give, forgive, and live.

B. Biblical Background

James 2 speaks of fairness, cancels partiality, and talks about being merciful. It talks about treating everyone as human and releasing forgiveness and kindness just as God has given to us.

This came at a time when people everywhere were more interested in a person's status than his or her substance. This came at a time when even the church was beginning to imitate the behavior of the outside world. James reached out to other followers of Christ, reminding them that discrimination and segregation had no place in the kingdom of God. James showed that God is against favoritism and that faith without good deeds is useless.

II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

A. Live Faith versus Dead Faith

(James 2:14-17)

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? 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? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

At this point, we enter the notorious battleground where we consider the contest between two formidable contenders: Faith and Works. Verse 14 summarizes the argument that was to come, which is this: What good is faith without works to verify that faith? What was elevated is genuine, verifiable faith as opposed to ineffective, inoperative faith. The contrast is between a dead, empty faith and a full, living faith. Works are needed in order to verify true faith. Like a skilled attorney pacing the floors of a courtroom, James purposefully poses this rhetorical question: Can faith alone save us? The answer is offered to the audience in the verses that follow.

Exhibit #1 is offered in verses 15-16

as attorney James makes his case. Suppose there was a homeless person who had no food, clothes, or shelter and it was in the wintertime. If the response to such a person was to send him or her away with a cheerful "Have a good day, and God bless you!" what good would that do? The connotation is that of being heartless, uncaring, and detached. Such a statement might have a semblance of spirituality, but the authenticity of one's spirituality would be seen in what is done about the homeless person's condition. It is not our words that verify our compassion, but it is our action. Action moves our sentimental, abstract faith into a verifiable, concrete state.

The deadness of abstract faith (verse 17) stems from its inability to make a practical difference in a particular condition or in the lives of any persons. Action-less faith is like a car without a motor, skates without wheels, and a sailboat without a sail. True faith goes beyond the head knowledge and produces tangible results. Having even the noblest of faith not accompanied by action is of absolutely no use

and may well be empty chatter just to make the speaker feel good about himself or herself.

B. Employed Faith versus Unemployed Faith

(James 2:18-22)

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. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? 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?

The thought pattern and line of reasoning is continued here in verse 18 from that which was introduced in James 2:14, 16. What if someone were to draw attention to the existence of his or her deeds in contrast to someone who only has faith? This situation might occur when someone performs a laudable act without being motivated by the powerful presence of faith. Righteousness does not rest in the act alone but also in the faith that motivates the act. When combined, the belief and the demonstration result in the manifestation of holistic faith.

Intellectual belief takes center stage and goes on trial for its validity (verse 19). Many people fall into the category identified here because they believe that God exists, but that is as far as it goes in relation to their everyday life. Intellectual assent can trick us into thinking that nothing more needs to be done. Other forms of inadequate belief alone may stem from family tradition ("My grandmama raised me in the church"), or personal intuition and opinion ("I just feel like God understands"). Other people may depend on their impressive theological education as validation of

their salvation. Sadly, none of this suffices. Even devils and demons believe that God exists because, being spiritual beings themselves, they are all too aware of the incontrovertible evidence for the existence of God. The problem comes in their lack of submission and obedience to the will and ways of God.

Attorney James establishes the utterly foolish choice to presume there is some significant value in possessing interior faith without also expressing exterior works (verse 20). As James prepares to elevate his argument, he introduces another rhetorical question to the reader and offers to substantiate his point with Exhibit #2. Just as a fruit tree without fruit is useless, so faith without works is dead.

When Abraham was bold enough to show he was willing to sacrifice his long-awaited son Isaac on the altar (verse 21), he set a high bar with regard to obediently trusting in God and walking by faith rather than by sight. Abraham is considered the father of the faithful and is a stellar example to the faithful of what it means to follow God in the face of daunting circumstances. Development of an Abraham-level faith is not a common phenomenon. What made Abraham's demonstration of faith stand out so much was that the stakes were so high in God's request for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Second, this request was unusual and unlike God's typical requests. Consequently, Abraham had to make sure that he was closely listening to the voice of God and not to some imitation of God. This requires closeness and intimacy. Third, Abraham's obedient act was not accompanied by God's giving Abraham advance understanding and clarification of the reason for the request. Sometimes, God may ask us to obey without providing a background

explanation. Fourth and finally, if Abraham followed through on his act of obedience he would not get the chance for a do-over if he misunderstood God's voice. It was a winner-take-all or loser-lose-all type of situation, and Abraham bet the bank on his God.

Highlighted in verse 22 is the absolute necessity for complete cooperation between the two entities of Faith and Works. These two spiritual giants serve the important purpose of mutually complementing each other and mutually validating each other. They are not in any kind of competition because they are on the same team. When these two team members work together and do their best in their respective roles, the result is a convincing win for the home team.

C. The Just Shall Live by Faith (James 2:23-26)

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. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Isaiah 41:8-10 (NIV) records, "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you: do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." This Scripture provides some helpful clues as to what is required to qualify as a friend of God (verse 23). *Clue 1:*

God chooses us. However, this does not mean that we are obligated to accept God's choice. The uniquely human ability of free moral agency enables us to accept or reject God's will. *Clue 2:* God's friendship with Abraham was so strong and substantive that the friendship continued beyond Abraham's life and extended to Abraham's children. Likewise, those who are a part of Abraham's spiritual seed today can also be afforded the privilege of friendship with God no matter how isolated from God they may feel. *Clue 3:* In addition to being a friend of God, we are also still called to be servants of God. Our service to God is simply an outgrowth or result of our friendship with God.

The dual concept of servanthood and friendship can sometimes be a bit confusing, and we may ask the question, "Which one are we to God—friends or servants?" Jesus weighed in on the understanding of friendship with God when He said to His disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15, NIV). The bottom line is that God wants an intimate spiritual friendship with us. But out of that friendship springs forth an innate desire on our behalf to want to honor, obey, and serve God because of the genuine sense of friendship.

James pleads for his readers to open their eyes to the simple yet profound reality of righteousness through strong faith which yields good works (verse 24).

James circles back to revisit the account of Rahab's redemptive actions in hiding the spies in Jericho (verse 25). Rahab's faith was activated when she heard about how God parted the Red Sea so the Israelites could safely pass. She must have reasoned that any God who was powerful

enough to part the sea and to destroy the cities of Sihon and Og deserved to be obeyed. It was a simple yet real faith. Her faith despite her profession illustrates the notion that the life of faith is a process and not a destination. All God wants is a yes that we believe that what God says is true.

The final simile in verse 26 is like a hammer driving the last nail into the coffin of an airtight case. The term *without* expresses the thought “apart from.” A body without a spirit is an unappealing sight that is likely to horrify one who encounters it. Likewise, faith without works is a ghost of a notion that can serve no good purpose on earth. If good works do not follow professed faith, then that fact alone is enough evidence to safely conclude that faith is not live faith. The presence or absence of a living faith might be understood by the following characteristic: A living faith is grounded in the Word of God. A living faith is guided by the Holy Spirit. A living faith is a growing faith. A living faith transforms the bearer and those with whom he or she comes into contact. A living faith is a confident faith that verbally articulates assurance in God and actively demonstrates that assurance through works. A

living faith is an active, living giving faith that is not afraid to sacrifice all (if necessary) to the glory of the kingdom of God.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

It is important to be not just a hearer of the Word or just a doer of the Word, but both a hearer and a doer of the Word. We need not broadcast our good works but allow those works to speak for themselves so that God, who sees our faith at work, will reward us, whether privately or publicly. True meaning in life is not about congratulating ourselves but about developing others. People do not care how much we know until they know how much we care. If Rahab can be included in the Biblical Hall of Faith because of her trust in God combined with her bold actions, then we as contemporary disciples have a challenge before us to live our best lives by faith and to yield good fruit in love.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to walk by faith and to be fruitful in that endeavor. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(August 10-16, 2020)

Faith without Works Is Dead

MONDAY, August 10: “Abraham Is Blessed for Fearing God” (Genesis 22:9-19)

TUESDAY, August 11: “Spies Are Saved by Rahab’s Quick Actions” (Joshua 2:1-7)

WEDNESDAY, August 12: “Forgive Others like God Forgave You” (Matthew 18:23-35)

THURSDAY, August 13: “Devoted to Good Works; Avoiding Distractions” (Titus 3:1-2, 8-11)

FRIDAY, August 14: “Works Guided by Loyalty to God” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

SATURDAY, August 15: “Receive God’s Mercy by Showing Mercy” (James 2:8-13)

SUNDAY, August 16: “Faith and Works Must Go Together” (James 2:14-26)