

Week 8: James: Faith without Works?

Hook



Main Point: Faith is not real faith if it doesn't show itself in Christlike action.

There are dozens of famous quotes about *home*. Here are some popular ones:

- “There is nothing like staying at home for real comfort.” —Jane Austen
- “There is no place more delightful than one’s own fireside.” —Marcus Tullius Cicero
- “Home is the nicest word there is.” —Laura Ingalls Wilder
- “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” —Robert Frost¹

Q: What are your favorite quotes about home?

Take a walk down the “wall art” aisle in a home decor store, and you’ll read all sorts of definitions as to what separates a “home” from a “house.” According to the 2022 Census Bureau, there were more than 15 million vacant domiciles in the United States.² However, it seems inaccurate to describe them as homes.

Q: What turns a house into a home?

Transition: Just as an abandoned, empty house can hardly be considered a home, today’s passage will challenge us to evaluate how we view faith apart from works. Is faith without any works truly faith?

RECAP: So far in our study of James, we have learned that this book in the Bible is wisdom literature, applied wisdom that gives practical advice for real everyday situations from a Christ-centered perspective. In chapter 1, James touched on some main ideas – wisdom, trials and temptations, true religion, and being doers of the Word – that he returns to in more detail throughout the letter.

In chapter 2, James started going into more detail on some of these topics. First, he taught that showing partiality to the rich was a sin because it was not loving the poor as ourselves. In our last lesson, he talked about the difference between the law of works-righteousness and the “law of liberty” and why we should choose grace. In this lesson, James circles back to the idea that faith without works is dead and uses examples from the Old Testament to show us how.

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James 2:14–19 and Matthew 15:7–11 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The way we live shows whether we truly have faith in Jesus.

Q: What does the metaphor about feeding the poor teach us about lip-service faith?

Q: What is the difference between the demons' belief in God and true faith in Christ?

This passage is one of the most studied and debated parts the book of James. This is where some pastors and theologians claim that James's theology and Paul's theology are in conflict, that Paul taught salvation by grace through faith alone while James taught salvation by grace plus works. But when we read the passage in its context, we quickly see that is not true at all. James just finished telling the churches they were *not* saved by following the law but by the Gospel. He wasn't telling us that salvation is attained by grace *plus works*, but that faith isn't real faith unless it shows itself in the way we live.

To do so, James first used a metaphor about helping the poor. This is another section people often take out of context and use to talk about something different from what it was originally intended to mean. Many people isolate verses 15 and 16 and use them to talk about a Christian's duty to help the poor. While it is true that God calls us to help the poor, that's not what James was teaching here. He was using the example of helping the poor as a metaphor for what it is like when someone says they have faith but do not live it out. We know it's a metaphor because James says, "In the same way...."

The metaphor is intentionally hyperbolic. It's meant to seem like a ridiculous thing to do, to show us just how unreasonable it is to say you have faith but not live it out. Imagine walking up to a homeless person and saying, "Keep warm and well fed," but that's it; you *do* nothing. James pointed out, very logically, that it is useless. You have made no difference in the person's life. They would still be cold and hungry. The point of the metaphor is that words alone do nothing. Another example could be if you saw someone struggling to lift a heavy package and said, "Be strong!" but then walked away without helping that person lift the package. Or you saw someone struggling to hit a golf ball and said, "Hit it!" but walked away without doing anything to show him how. What good would that do? The point James was making wasn't that we should help the poor (though we should!) or that we should help someone lift a package or swing a golf club.

His theological point is that our words alone do nothing if they're not accompanied by action.

In the same way, James told us that saying you have faith in God *does* nothing if it's not accompanied by action. By "does nothing," he meant that that kind of faith doesn't change anything; it doesn't save you (v. 14). Not because works save us, but because that kind of faith is just lip service; it's not real. It doesn't do anything. James wasn't saying that salvation is about following the rules or doing "enough" to be saved. He never gave a list of any particular works or how many you must do to be saved. That wasn't his point. His point was simply that if you say you have faith, but you don't live it out, your faith isn't a real, saving faith. It's just empty talk.

The life application of this passage isn't about helping the poor, though that is one of the things we should do as part of living out our faith. The application for us is to look very honestly at our lives and ask ourselves if we are just giving lip service to God, like the example of just giving lip service to the poor. Imagine how a poor person would feel if you walked up to them and said, "Be warm and well fed" but walked away without helping. Imagine how the person struggling with the package or with their golf swing would feel. What would they think about you? What would they think about your words to them? Now imagine what God thinks and feels when we give lip service to Him but don't live out our faith and walk in His ways.

Unfortunately, there were many people in James's day who only gave lip service to God, just like in Jesus's day (Matthew 15:8) and in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 33:31) and in all of human history. And there are many who do the same thing today. It is not our job to judge other people's faith, but we are called to look at our own hearts and examine our own lives to be sure our faith is real. We know we cannot lose our salvation no matter what we do, but if our lives don't match our words, we must ask ourselves if we are really saved in the first place.

Q: How have you seen some people give lip service to God but not really follow Him?

Q: How do you converse about faith with someone who thinks they are saved, but shows no fruit?

Q: In what ways have your actions not matched your words when it comes to faith?

James 2:20–24; Genesis 15:1–6; 22:1–14; and Hebrews 11:8–10, 17–19 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Abraham was saved by faith but showed his faith in action.

Q: How/why was Abraham considered righteous in the eyes of God?

Q: How did his willingness to sacrifice Isaac show his faith in God?

Much of the New Testament talks about the faith of Abraham, how he was saved by his faith and all people of faith are the true children of Abraham (Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6). Genesis tells us that when Abraham believed God's promises of descendants, even though he and his wife were old and barren, God "counted" his faith as righteousness. The word for "counted" or "credited" is an accounting term that referred to credits on a bank statement. Because God credited his faith as righteousness, Abraham was able to stand before God justified, not based on any good deeds he did to earn it, but on his faith. Hebrews tells us that Abraham and other people of faith in the Old Testament had a forward-looking faith. Even though Jesus had not yet come, their lives showed faith in the fulfillment of God's promises to come in Christ.

Hebrews 11 has been called "the faith chapter" by many theologians because it tells the stories of many Old Testament characters who followed God in faith. The chapter opens with, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation" (Hebrews 11:1–2). Then it lists example after example of Old Testament people who lived out their faith in God in action. James used two of these same examples, Abraham and Rahab, to explain how faith has to show itself in the way we live. Scripture tells us it was Abraham's faith that justified him before God, but his faith wasn't just intellectual belief alone; it showed itself in action. Not one of these examples was a person who just gave lip service to God; they all showed their faith through action.

When God first called Abraham to follow Him from his homeland to the land of promise, Abraham responded in faith and followed God to a land unknown to him (Hebrews 11:8). Abraham lived his whole life by faith, as a sojourner through the land, following wherever God led, looking forward to the promise of His future kingdom in heaven (Hebrews 11:9–10). But the biggest proof of Abraham's faith was when he willingly offered Isaac as a sacrifice to God (Hebrews 11:17–19). This was an especially intense act of faith because Isaac was the fulfillment of God's promise to them. It would have been shocking to hear God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. How would God's promises come true if the promised son was dead? But Hebrews tells us that Abraham trusted God could raise him from the dead (Hebrews 11:19).

James said Abraham's faith was "active along with his works" and his faith was "completed" by what he did (v. 22). This is not the same thing as saying that we have to follow the rules to get to heaven. There was no rule in God's law to sacrifice your children. In fact, the law prohibited it! Abraham's actions weren't about his earning his salvation through following the rules; it was about Abraham's trusting the Lord – the

same way Jesus trusted that sacrificing Himself on the Cross was part of the plan and God would use it for good.

James goes on in v. 24 to say that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone”. On the surface, this looks different than Paul’s statement, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28), and yet they both use the same reference to Abraham to support what they write. However, Paul specifies “works of the law,” in order to dissuade his audience from trying to find salvation in the law of Moses, which is a curse to them because they cannot fulfill it. Paul also writes about justification as the act of being declared righteous before God despite our sin. James, on the other hand, speaks generically of works and uses justification as synonym with proof or evidence. Our faith is proved, or evidenced, by our works. So then, it is by grace alone through faith alone that we are saved, but a saving faith is justified, or proved, or evidenced by works, because works are the fruit of our faith.

This is how faith and action work together. It’s not “good works” in the sense of doing enough good deeds to be a “good person.” It’s the fact that our actions show who or what we put our trust in. If we constantly worry about money, it shows we are putting our trust in money. If we trust in the Lord to provide, it shows we have faith in Him. If we always think about how we look or what people think of us, it shows we are putting our trust in other people’s approval. If we seek God’s approval over human beings’, it shows we are putting our trust in Him instead of the world.

Q: How does your life show that you put your trust in the Lord? What particular actions?

Q: In what situations do people struggle to trust? How can we trust even when it’s hard?

Q: When is it hardest for you to bear fruit as the evidence of your faith?

James 2:25–26; Joshua 2:1–5; 6:24–25; and Hebrews 11:31 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Rahab’s action showed her faith in God even from just hearing about Him.

Q: How did Rahab hear about God? Why did she put her trust in Him over her own people?

Q: How did Rahab’s actions show her faith in God? How was she saved?

Rahab’s story is one of those in the Old Testament that proves to us that God’s rescue plan has never been just for Israel alone; it was always meant to include people of faith

from every nation, even their enemies. Rahab was a prostitute who lived in the city of Jericho, which was the first city the Israelites conquered when they entered the Promised Land. Their army did nothing in their own power to take that city; it was completely a supernatural act of God, and the Lord's army showed trust in His promises by following His somewhat ridiculous (by military standards) commands to march around the city for seven days.

But before that happened, Rahab showed great trust in the Lord, despite not even being a member of the community of Israel. Before the battle, Joshua sent two spies into Jericho to search out the land. They stayed in Rahab's house and when the king of Jericho called for them, she hid them on her roof and lied to the king about them. When Rahab helped them escape, she said, "I know the Lord has given you the land" (Joshua 2:9). This was a statement of faith in their God. She said all the people of Jericho had heard about the miracle at the Red Sea, how the Lord had dried up the land for them to cross but destroyed the Egyptian army. And they had heard of the battle with the Amorite kings, Sihon and Og. She said when the people heard it their "hearts melted." They were afraid.

But Rahab reacted differently than the other people in Jericho. They reacted in fear of God and Israel. The king tried to kill the spies. But Rahab responded with faith. She confessed that their God was not just "a god" but the Lord of heaven and earth (Joshua 2:11). She chose to disobey her own king to help His spies escape. This was an act of treason against her king. If anyone had found out she had helped the enemy, they would have killed her and her whole family. But she chose to put her trust in the Lord. She believed God would win the battle and that she and her family would be saved (Joshua 2:12–13). She said it with her lips, but her actions also showed it. She didn't just say she believed, she put her life on the line to join God's side. This is what happens when we put our trust in God. We choose to be on His side, to join His army against the "prince of this world." We choose to put our trust in Him, even when His commands may seem ridiculous to the world.

James said "even" Rahab the prostitute was considered righteous based on faith that showed itself in action. This was an intentional word choice to emphasize that there is not a single person on earth who is beyond God's salvation. When it came to righteousness by the standards of the Jewish law, Rahab was about as unrighteous as you could get. She was not only a Gentile, but she was also a prostitute. This was the last person they would expect to be commended for her righteousness! But regardless of what she had done when it came to obeying the rules of the law, she showed faith in the Lord by her actions.

The Gentile prostitute and the Jewish patriarch share one thing in common, faith that showed itself in action. This is the kind of faith that is real. The kind of faith that is alive, not dead. The kind of faith that saves. James said that even the demons “believe” in God (v. 19). Belief is not enough; only faith that shows itself in action will save. Like the demons, the people of Jericho “believed” in God. They knew He was the all-powerful God of the universe. But they didn’t respond to Him with faith; they responded with fear – “and shudder[ed]” (v. 19). Belief in God and fear of Him isn’t enough. Salvation comes from putting your trust in God. Looking to Him as your help and your redeemer. There is a huge difference between “belief” and “faith.”

Q: What can we learn about God’s redemptive purpose from seeing very different people in Rahab and Abraham being united by faith?

Q: Describe the difference between belief and faith. How can you know if you have a true, saving faith in God and not just belief?

Q: Describe someone you know who is the last person you would have expected to turn to Jesus in faith, but he or she did. How does that life bear witness to God’s grace? What kind of impact has this person’s testimony made on your community?

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Took

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Reflect on the stories of Abraham, Rahab, and the many others celebrated in the Hall of Faith. Now, turn that reflection inward: What bold, faith-fueled steps have you taken? How has your life become a living testimony that could inspire others toward deeper trust in God?

Teacher, take a moment to share what you hope your family and friends will say about your legacy one day. What do you want them to remember about how you lived out your faith? You could also pull from the powerful words spoken at the memorial services of great heroes of faith — you'll find several examples from Billy Graham's service [\[here\]](#). Challenge your LifeGroup to live their faith out boldly, make the most of the time they've been given, and always be sure to share the hope they have in Jesus as they go about living for Him.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on the difference between works-righteousness and faith that shows itself in action. What is different about saying a true faith is accompanied by works and saying good works save us? How would you explain that difference to an unbeliever or a small child? How do you reconcile the theological truth that salvation is by grace through faith alone with what James said here about works?

PRAY for God to help you live a life of true faith. Pray for the strength and the faith to walk in trust and obedience to His ways. Ask Him to fill you with His Holy Spirit so you will know and understand how He wants you to walk in faith.

ACT: Study the Old Testament heroes. Look at every Old Testament hero of faith in Hebrews 11. Go back to the Old Testament and read each of their stories. Look for how they showed faith in God through their actions. Reflect on how it may have been hard or countercultural for them to show faith in God. Think about what you can learn from their stories about how to live out your faith in action.

¹ <https://www.today.com/life/inspiration/quotes-about-home-rcna81557>

² <https://usafacts.org/articles/how-many-vacant-homes-are-there-in-the-us/>