

Faith That Works



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *James 2:14–26; Rom. 3:27, 28; Titus 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:2; Rom. 4:1–5; Josh. 2:1–21.*

Memory Text: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (*James 2:26, NKJV*).

He was a successful doctor and an elder in a high-profile church of several hundred members. He was a major giver to the church's big projects, and his generosity encouraged others to be more sacrificial. The doctor was also a great preacher. When the pastor was gone, he spoke, and everyone looked forward to his messages, which were theologically deep, heartfelt, and spiritual.

Then one day the truth came out. The doctor's absence at church the previous Sabbath had not been because he was on vacation, as many had thought. No, he was found dead in his beachfront condo from an overdose of recreational narcotics.

Worse was the shocking revelation that in his bedroom were dozens of pornographic videos and magazines. The church was devastated, especially the young people, who had looked up to him as a role model. Though we must leave all judgment in God's hands, the doctor's actions certainly call into question the reality of his faith.

The point? Though we are saved by faith, we cannot separate faith and works in the life of a Christian, a crucial but often misunderstood truth expounded upon in the book of James.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 8.

Dead Faith

“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” (James 2:14, NKJV). How do we understand this verse in the context of salvation by faith alone? Read James 2:15–17; compare Rom. 3:27, 28; Eph. 2:8, 9.

Faith without works. James 2:15, 16 gives a vivid illustration of this kind of phony faith. As we have already seen, obedience in the book of James is relational. 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,” when God has provided us the means to help that brother or sister.

Of course, needs can be endless, and we cannot meet them all. But there is a principle 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 appealed to Him for help. On the way, a woman approached from behind and touched Jesus’ garment. 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 share as well as to receive. Then He said the same words we have in James 2:16: “Go in peace” (*Mark 5:34, NIV*). But, unlike the words in James, in this case, they actually meant something!

When we recognize a need but do nothing about it, we have missed an opportunity to exercise 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 starkly: 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 Greek 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 express our faith through our works while protecting ourselves from the deception that our works save us?

Saving Faith

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

James uses a common rhetorical technique whereby a potential objector comes forward. In this case, the objector tries to drive a wedge between faith and works by suggesting that as long as a person has one or the other, he or she is fine. But the whole point James is trying to make is that Christians cannot hope to be saved by faith if there are no corresponding works: “Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (*vs. 18, NKJV*).

The key point is that not just any faith will save. Genuine faith, *saving* faith, is characterized by good works. Likewise, works are only good works if they spring from faith. Faith and works are inseparable. Like two sides of a coin, one cannot exist 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 corresponding works.

Consider Paul’s attitude toward works in Ephesians 2:10, 1 Thesalonians 1:3, 1 Timothy 5:25, and Titus 2:14. Why are good works so important?

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

“If man cannot, by any of his good works, merit salvation, then it must be wholly of grace, received by man as a sinner because he receives and believes in Jesus. It is wholly a free gift. Justification by faith is placed beyond controversy. And all this controversy is ended, as soon as the matter is settled that the merits of fallen man in his good works can never procure eternal life for him.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 20.

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

The “Faith” of Demons

If works are absent, there is only one other way to “prove” the genuineness of one’s faith: by orthodoxy. 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 an intellectual knowledge of truth has its place, a very important place. Yet, that knowledge, in and of itself, is not sufficient to prove that a person has saving faith.

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

The most fundamental statement of faith in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 6:4: “ ‘Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!’ ” (*NASB*). Known as the *Shema* (because this is the Hebrew word it begins with), this verse neatly summarizes belief in one God. Every other biblical teaching flows from this cardinal truth.

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

An intellectual faith that has no effect on how we act is useless; in fact, it is the same faith that demons have, demons who are actively at work to deceive us with false doctrines and lies. As with Israel at the time of Jesus, demons will encourage people to believe their deceptions based on their victims’ desires to hold on to impure and unrighteous behavior: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils” (*1 Tim. 4:1*).

Faith must be manifested in our lives or else it is not saving faith; it is, instead, “the faith of demons,” and such a faith won’t save us any more than it will save them.

Abraham's Faith

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

Interestingly, both James and Paul quote Genesis 15:6, but they seem to arrive at opposite conclusions. According to James, Abraham was justified by works, but Paul seems, in Romans 4:2, to deny this possibility explicitly (*compare vs. 24*).

However, the immediate context of Romans 4 has to do with whether circumcision is necessary for justification; that is, whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be saved (*Rom. 3:28–30*). Paul shows that Abraham's faith, not his "work" of being circumcised, was the basis of justification, because Abraham believed even before he was circumcised. Abraham was circumcised later as an outward sign of his inward faith (*Rom. 4:9–11*). But works alone, even circumcision, are not sufficient for justification, because only those "who also walk in the steps of that faith [of] our father Abraham" (*Rom. 4:12, NKJV*) will be justified.

Is this emphasis really so different from that of James? Paul even goes on to use the same "proof" of Abraham's faith that James does (*see Rom. 4:17–21*). Abraham believed God could resurrect Isaac because He "gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist" (*vs. 17, NASB; compare Heb. 11:17–19*). Paul also defines saving faith as "being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform" (*Rom. 4:21, NKJV*). In short, faith that trusts God to keep His promises and obediently relies on His word is saving faith. These works are not "works of law" but "works of faith." Or, as James puts it: "Do you see that *faith was working* together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" (*2:22, NKJV; emphasis added*).

Many stress the importance of faith and works, but even this separates the two, at least to some extent. True faith is "faith working through love" (*Gal. 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 motivated 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 the lack thereof) impact your faith?

The Faith of Rahab

“Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?” (*James 2:25, NKJV*). Read **Joshua 2:1–21**. How do we understand this example, again in the context of salvation by faith alone?

According to Hebrews 11:31, the inhabitants of Jericho did not believe. Most modern translations describe them as being “disobedient.” The inhabitants of Jericho knew about Israel’s signal 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 as well as His abhorrence of idolatry and immorality: “All these events were known to the inhabitants of Jericho, and there were many who shared Rahab’s conviction, though they refused to obey it.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 492.

Rahab was not saved because of her dishonesty but in spite of it. She believed in the true God, and she acted on that faith by protecting the spies that Joshua sent out. There were also conditions: she obeyed the messengers’ direction to hang the scarlet cord out her window, which was reminiscent of the blood sprinkled around the doorposts of the Israelite homes at the time of their Passover deliverance (*see Exod. 12:21–24*). While far from perfect, Rahab’s life is a model of faith that shows the reality of God’s forgiveness and grace for everyone willing to step out in faith and to trust God with the results.

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

Just as the body is only a corpse without the breath of life, so faith without works is dead. In addition, without real faith any “obedience” we might try to render would only amount to “dead works” (*Heb. 6:1, 9:14*), which are meaningless in the sight of God.

A harlot saved by faith? If that were the only example of salvation by faith we had, what false conclusions could we draw from it? Nevertheless, what hope can you take from her story for yourself?

Further Study: “When self is put entirely away, then you can obtain a new and rich experience, you will discern your own imperfections as you lie low at the foot of the cross, and as you view the perfections of Christ, self will sink into insignificance.

“Christ will appear to the discerning eye the perfection of attractive loveliness; then His mould will be upon mind and heart, and will be revealed in the character. The impress of the divine mind should be made upon the heart, and manifested in the life. Come to Jesus in your need, pray in living faith, hold fast to the hand of divine power, believe, only believe, and you will see the salvation of God. If you will be taught, God will teach you; if you will be led, He will lead you to fountains of living waters.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Southern Africa*, p. 26.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read over James 2 in one quick sitting. What is the essential message there for those who trust only in the merits of Christ’s righteousness for their salvation?
- 2 Some argue that James talks about faith and works without reference to Paul, and that we should interpret James on his own terms. What’s wrong with that kind of thinking? Why, especially in this case, is it important to keep in mind what other texts say about faith and works? In fact, in the heat of the Protestant Reformation, Catholic apologists often ran to 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 on all the texts we have at our disposal?
- 3 It is often said that faith and works should be kept in “balance.” In light of this lesson, do you agree with that statement? Discuss your answer with others in the class.
- 4 Why do we find no mention in James (or the rest of the New Testament) of Abraham’s failure of faith in connection with Ishmael or about Rahab’s lying? What does this fact teach us about what it means to be covered by Christ’s righteousness?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *James 2:14–26*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: (1) Realize that good works are a natural result of genuine faith; (2) discern that belief is not the same as faith; and (3) recognize that the relationship between faith and works is like the body and the spirit—integrated into one.

Feel: Experience the assurance that comes from trusting God to keep His promises and obediently relying on His Word in saving faith.

Do: Accept the miracle of God’s re-creative power whereby He gives him or her the faith and Spirit-led obedience to do His will.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understanding Faith That Works

- Ⓐ What is the difference between works as an “outward sign” of faith and the “outworking” of faith? Give examples of each.
- Ⓑ What is true love, and how is it revealed?
- Ⓒ Is it possible to divide faith and good works? What is faith without good works? What are works without faith?

II. Feel: Experiencing God’s Assurance

- Ⓐ True or False: “No one who tries to be saved by keeping the law actually succeeds in keeping it.” (*See Gal. 3:10.*) Explain your answer.
- Ⓑ Why is it that good works come naturally to those who have true faith?

III. Do: Accepting God’s Gift of Active Faith

- Ⓐ How can one experience the difference between belief and faith?
- Ⓑ Explain how “doing good” is an exercise of faith.

► **Summary:** Faith that works can be a somewhat difficult concept to grasp. Some want to separate faith and works, but genuine, saving faith is characterized by good works. We can never be saved by our works, but without them our faith is dead. Words and actions go together, and faith reveals itself in works. An intellectual faith that has no effect on how we act is useless. Good works are not just the outward sign of faith; they are the outworking of faith.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *James 2:21–26*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: “Good works” focus on others and stem from the outworking of faith rather than on being just the outward sign of faith.

Just for Teachers: At least as early as the book of James, we see that human beings have struggled with the false dichotomy of faith *or* works, love *or* law, and mercy *or* justice as being the way to happiness and salvation. In this lesson, we will see how good works come naturally to those who have true faith.

Opening Activity: It was a revolutionary day—June 25, 1967. For the first time ever, 400 million people in 31 countries were simultaneously brought together via satellite during the first live global television link. Titled *Our World*, the live, two-and-a-half-hour TV special featured performers from around the world, with the most memorable saved for the closing act. Based in a London studio, Britain’s famous foursome—the Beatles—rocked the world, telling how all problems could be solved: “It’s easy. All you need is love. . . . Love is all you need.”—“Our World” (TV Special), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_World_\(TV_special\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_World_(TV_special)).

Nearly half a century later, the words still echo on airwaves and brainwaves, and continue making theological waves. “Love (and/or faith) is all you need,” say some. Others counter, “What about works?” Thus, the age-old question of how one is saved rages on.

Consider This: Are there times in life when all you need is love? If so, when are those times, and how is love revealed? Are there times when more than just love is needed? Give examples. What about salvation—is love all we need, or is there more to it than that? Explain. What is true love, and how is it revealed?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In Paul’s day, many of his countrymen flaunted circumcision as a badge of righteousness. It served as “proof” of one’s belief in God and membership in the covenant community of Israel (*Gen. 17:10–14, Exod. 12:48*). But it also meant that many felt no need of faith in Christ or forgiveness through His blood, because God had

provided the temple sacrifices to atone for sin (see *Lev. 1:4; 4:20, 26, 35; 5:6; 6:7, et cetera*).

Think, in turn, about similar behavior that distinguishes us as Seventh-day Adventists. We keep the Sabbath from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. We abstain from harmful substances like tobacco, alcohol, and harmful drugs. From what we eat to what we wear, we bear a living testimony of our faith. But might these practices, as good and important as they are, also run the risk of becoming merely “badges of righteousness”? How can we avoid falling into the trap of making them a means of salvation? Ask the class about the role of attitude in the Christian life. Is there a place for taking pride in the good things we do? Why, or why not? (See *Luke 17:7–10*.)

I. The Source and Goal of Righteousness (Review *James 2:20–26* with your class.)

Abraham, as the “father” of Israel, was the prime example of righteousness. Being the “quarry” or source from which Israel was dug, he was the natural authority to look to (*Isa. 51:1, 2*) to learn about obedience. It was natural to think of circumcision as the all-important proof of following in his footsteps. But, in fact, circumcision came as a result of believing (*Rom. 4:10, 11*).

As both Paul and James point out, obedience itself was not the most important element, but Abraham’s faith—faith that God would enable Sarah to give birth to the promised son (*Rom. 4:19–21*), faith willing even to give back that miracle son as an offering (*James 2:21, 22*), believing that God could even raise him from the dead (*Heb. 11:19*). Both James and Paul even quote the same verse in Genesis to prove this point (*Gen. 15:6; compare Rom. 4:3, James 2:23*). (Contrast this biblical perspective with the understanding of the Jews about Abraham as their father in *John 8:39*.) The Greek word used to describe the man in *James 2:20* is *kene*, which literally means “empty.” Ironically, most versions translate this in intellectual terms (“foolish” or “vain”) despite the fact that James is arguing against an intellectual faith. The more likely allusion is to a man devoid of the Spirit of God and ripe for demonic control.

Jesus describes this situation in *Matthew 12:43–45*. When a person decides to change and leave off the sinful way of life (epitomized in the parable by an unclean spirit leaving the person), a void is created. The void must be filled by the Spirit of God if the change is ultimately to be for the better. Otherwise, as Jesus warns, the final result may be

even worse, as it was with those who refused to accept Jesus. We could even be deceived by demons helping us to feign piety: “The same evil spirit that tempted Christ in the wilderness, and that possessed the maniac of Capernaum, controlled the unbelieving Jews. But with them he assumed an air of piety, seeking to deceive them as to their motives in rejecting the Saviour. Their condition was more hopeless than that of the demoniac, for they felt no need of Christ and were therefore held fast under the power of Satan.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 256. Spiritual life is a miracle of God’s re-creative power, whereby God gives us faith and Spirit-led obedience to do His will.

The Bible indicates that faith is made perfect by works of obedience. This was true of Abraham, but it was even more true of Jesus (*see Heb. 2:10; 5:8, 9*), whose footsteps we are to follow (*1 Pet. 2:21–24, 1 John 2:6*). In what way do lifestyle choices such as Sabbath keeping and what we eat and drink prove the genuineness of our faith (or lack thereof)? How is it different from being saved by doing these things?

Questions for Discussion:

- ① Have you ever felt spiritually “empty” as a result of going against your conscience? What difference does having the right doctrine make if our lifestyles don’t match our faith?
- ② Why is obedience only possible through the gift and working of the Holy Spirit (*Rom. 8:13, 14; Titus 3:5–7, 8*)?
- ③ Discuss with the class the relative importance of practicing the truth and being guided by the Spirit. Is one more important than the other? Explain. What happens when either becomes too dominant?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Knowledge is important, but application is key; the two go hand in hand, much like faith and works. Encourage your class members to take time to analyze the truth-revealing verses below and to carefully consider the thought questions.

Thought Questions:

Which is more important, faith or obedience? Defend your answer. Can a person have faith without obedience? Or obedience without faith? True or False: “Faith is the root of all true obedience.” Explain.

In his letter to Titus, a young Greek believer, Paul explains the relationship between good works (“deeds”), mercy, and salvation in Titus 3:5, 8, NASB.

Reread the text, and answer these questions:

- 1 We are saved not on the basis of what, but according to what?

- 2 Why does Paul emphasize that this is a “trustworthy statement”?

- 3 Those who have believed God (faith) will be careful to do what?

- 4 In these verses, what does Paul say are “good and profitable”?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The following idea works well in a group “brainstorming” session. However, individual activities resulting from the brainstorming may be assigned to individuals or couples. Stress that these works are an outworking, or a completion, of our faith in Jesus.

Activity: As we have seen, “faith-works” are others-oriented. Jesus invites us to exercise our faith through works that will be a blessing to others. He says:

“ ‘Walk with me. Teach with me. Feed others with me. Wash feet with me. Also feed me. Give me water. Clothe me. Visit me.’ Follow Me! He commanded.”—“If Jesus Flew Into Town Tomorrow,” A Faith That Works.com, <http://afaiththatworks.com>.

Please notice that these are acts of faith, not thoughts or feelings of faith. God is interested in faith that works, not a “faith” that just thinks or feels, no matter how strong or sincere.

Brainstorm, as a class, as to how you can put your faith into action. Look at the verbs above, and consider them one by one—*who* could you **walk** with this week? Who needs to be **taught** about Jesus—perhaps a children’s Sabbath School class would be grateful for your help? Is there someone in need that you could **feed** this week? Whose feet do you *need* to **wash** at the next foot-washing opportunity? How can you and/or your class help **give** clean water to those who need it? Can you help **clothe** someone in need this week? When was the last time you **visited** someone who has not been to church in a while or is in the hospital or prison? Jesus bids us today to “**Follow Me!**”