

## Unit III. Faith and Wisdom in James

# “Just Do It”

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 18:23-35

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26

PRINT PASSAGE: James 2:14-26

**Key Verse—** As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:26, KJV)

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As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.  
(James 2:26, NIV)

### Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

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

### \*Key Terms

**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).

\*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)

### Introduction

When my wife, Lottie, entered my life, I circled the third Sunday in May on my calendar. Why? It was Homecoming Sunday at her home church, Pleasant Hill. Just like the salmon headed back to the stream of their birth, former members or their relatives





### The Biblical Context

**Faith.** The most-often cited definition of *faith* is in Hebrews 11:1-2: “The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd” (MSG). In the Bible, we see four aspects of faith: (1) belief (see Hebrews 11:1, 6); (2) work (see James 2:14-26); (3) trust/faithfulness (see 1 Corinthians 4:2); and doctrine (see Jude 1:3).

**Roman Road to Salvation.** The apostle Paul outlined the path toward salvation in the first eight chapters of Romans. Because of the redemptive work of Christ on the Cross, all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile, are justified immediately, counted as right with God (see Romans 3:21–5:21). We receive the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus becomes our intercessor before His Father. Justification is God’s response to believing faith. Although justification happens immediately, the next step of sanctification (see Romans 6:1–8:17) is a process. It is during this process that we move from a believing faith to a practical faith. In so doing, we become more like Jesus daily. At our deaths or the Rapture, we’ll move from the process of sanctification to being instantly glorified by our Savior, Jesus (see Romans 8:18-39). Only Jesus can present us faultless to His Father (see Jude 24).

would return home. For those of us in the South, a church’s homecoming is the biggest day of the year. It was a spiritual time of remembrance and thanksgiving. It is a reminder of the faith of our forebears. We could always count on a “hallelujah time” on the “hill that’s pleasant.”

I was most struck by the story of faith as told by their late leader Pastor C. J. Thomas. He was special to us because he officiated at our wedding ceremony. His stories of being faithful to God and to each other in marriage have continued to encourage my wife and me. He had one story of faith that stuck out. Early on in his marriage, he and his wife, Sis. Inez, struggled to make ends meet. Yes, he was working, but jobs in his day didn’t pay the best. They had children to take care of and bills to pay. He spoke of one fateful day when there wasn’t any food in the house. He fretted for a minute. He then told his wife to set the table. That was problematic. She would be setting a table for dinner with nothing substantive to eat in the house. He told her to do it anyhow.

He went to a local grocer with nothing but lint in his pockets. Somehow or another, the grocer told him to get some potatoes. That was the point where he got happy and started shouting. You know what happened: he came home with groceries. They ate dinner. The moral of his story was simple: you must be more than a “faith talker”—you must be a “faith walker.” His trust in God was contagious. He could have sat down to have a pity party. Instead, he decided to put his faith to work and the rest was his testimony.

## ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

### “Dead” Faith (*James 2:14-19*)

#### 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.

## 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.

In this second chapter, James focused on temptations and trials. In verses 1-13, he dealt with partiality and favoritism. Collectively in James 2 we see how faith might be pressed but does not fail. In verses 14-26 we find some of the most hotly debated verses in the New Testament. Faith or being faithful is the connecting theme of each chapter of James's epistle. He knew that some of his listeners only associated faith with their initial acceptance of Jesus as their personal Savior. He wanted them to understand that believing was only the beginning. Again, making it personal by referring to his listeners as "brothers and sisters" (verse 14), James asked rhetorically what good is faith without some evidence in the form of deeds (works). A lack of deeds was really evidence of a lack of faith (verse 14). To be clear, James was not questioning faith's power to save. Rather, he was referring to an empty faith—a faith without works.

To ensure his listeners did not misunderstand him, James provided a simple example in verses 15-16. Suppose one of their fellow believers (not just an unknown person) was in need. Would they simply leave them cookie-cutter religious phrases such as "I'll pray for you"? They would quickly recognize that talk was cheap. Action was needed. None of the words were going to clothe or feed their fellow believer. James followed the story with a statement of what a living faith is by describing dead faith (verse 17). A living faith is characterized by deeds (works) (verse 17). In case there was some instigator in the crowd listening to James's epistle being read, James



addressed the person who would talk about “collective action.” Such “action” would involve a kind of “show and tell.” One person challenges another person with the words “You have faith, I have deeds.” Such a statement is designed to spotlight the distinction between faith and works; however, James underscores the fact that faith is seen through works. They are not mutually exclusive (**verse 18**). James even went a step further. We can’t see a believer’s faith, but we can see the evidence of their faith in their works (**verse 18**). Just professing faith in God or the belief that God exists is not enough. James told his listeners that even demons believe that God exists and tremble in the presence of God (**verse 19**).

While one person will claim that he or she has faith with no actions, James would respond by demonstrating his faith by his actions. In other words, true believers do not need to tell others they have faith. Other people would recognize their faith in their sincere actions.

 **What Do You Think?** Since one hospital stay may cost upwards of \$100,000, what are some effective ways for us to help those in our congregations with such needs?

## What about Abraham? (*James 2:20-24*)

### KJV

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?

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.

### NIV

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 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.

James made very logical statements about faith and works in verses 14-19. His words were in keeping with Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law of Moses during His first coming.



However, James knew that his listeners were deeply rooted in their Jewish heritage. So, anticipating those who would still doubt his teaching and would require further evidence (verse 20), James shared about the “father of Jews,” Abraham. Every Jew knew Abraham’s life story. They knew the story of Abraham’s offering his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (verse 21; see Genesis 22:1-19). At every step in his walk with the Lord, Abraham demonstrated his faith with action. When he left his home country as an old man at God’s command (see Genesis 12:1-9), it was faith in action. When the writer of Hebrews spoke of Abraham and, for that matter, the other heroines/heroes of faith, he focused on their actions. It was by their actions that they were counted as being persons of faith.

We also note in verse 22a that the phrase “working together” (Greek: *synergeo*) speaks of an intimate relationship. Our English word *synergy* is derived from this Greek word. In business, *synergy* is described as  $1 + 1 = 3$ . The idea is that working together produces much more than working separately. That was the way Abraham matured, or was “made complete” (verse 22), in his faith. In verse 23, James next repeated Genesis 15:6. In that verse, James recounted how God counted Abraham right before Him because of his faith in action—faith and deeds (works). That is why Abraham “was called God’s friend” (verse 23). As a summary to his example of Jewish faith and a reflection on verses 14-18, James reiterated his focal point by telling his listeners that being counted righteous by God takes more than believing or professing faith. It also takes the flipside of the same coin of practicing faith (verse 24). Just as we cannot separate one side of a coin from the other side, neither can we separate sincere professing faith from practicing faith.

**🔍 What Do You Think?** Considering verses 20-24, how would you respond to a follower of another faith who claims that only certain people can be saved?

## Rahab’s Example (James 2:25-26)

### KJV

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.

### NIV

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.

Perhaps anticipating Jewish Christian resistance to Gentiles’ becoming Christians, James used another Old Testament example of faith. We read about a number of Old



Testament persons that were cited in Hebrews 11 for their faith. Most of these people were Jewish. However, James chose a Gentile. Rahab (**verse 25**) was not even an ideal Gentile. First, she was a woman. We know that women had very few rights in ancient Near Eastern culture. They were basically second-class citizens. Second, she was a pagan worshipper. The people of Jericho worshipped Baal, Asherah, and other idol gods. Third, she was a prostitute (**verse 25**). While we consider such a profession most undesirable today, it was one of the few choices available for a single woman in the society of that day. The other choices were being a beggar or a slave. Either way, Rahab was not the ideal candidate for an example of faith in action.

Rahab, though, recognized the power of the God of the Israelites. As she interacted with the spies (see Joshua 2), Rahab professed her faith in the God of Israel (see Joshua 2:8-13). I know that some would argue that she was only believing in God to save herself and her family. Those same people would say, "That was the only reason she hid the Hebrew spies" (**verse 25**; see Joshua 2:4). However, we must not forget that God knows our hearts. Rahab was sincere. Confirmation of her sincerity is her inclusion in the human lineage of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (see Matthew 1:5). After her profession of faith, she sent the Hebrew spies another way into the mountains, instructing them to stay there for three days before they returned to their people (see Joshua 2:16). That was definitely more than she had to do. Her profession of faith and her acts of faith justified her with God. James's use of Rahab's story as an example foreshadowed the inclusion of Gentiles into Christianity. James concluded this section of his writing with a summary statement in **verse 26**: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

**What Do You Think?** Why is it so hard for some in our congregations to fully accept those among us who used to be "out there" in the world?

## A Closing Thought

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.


## Your Life

We all take pride in being part of a church family. However, we need to be known for more than just having our name associated with a congregation. We should more importantly be known as "doers," people who get things done for the Lord through our help to others in the household of faith and beyond. We need to be wary of people who brag about what they can do or have done but have not done anything lately. In contrast, we need to be examples of authentic Christians, not just known for our flowery words.



## Your World!

The message of today's lesson is clear: we must not only be professing in our faith but also doing because of our faith. This week, you should consider taking an inventory of your faith in action. If you find yourself lacking, approach your congregation's "helps" or benevolent ministry about how you can help. You may also look to extend your congregation's "helps" ministry into the community surrounding your congregation's physical location.

 **Closing Prayer** Merciful God, we thank You today for how You continually provide for our needs, even blessing us with some of our "wants." We ask You to keep us humble by stirring our hearts to be better doers in our faith walk with You. We make this request in Your Son Jesus' name. Amen.

## Conclusion

### (Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

In preparation for next week's lesson, consider how bits and bridles, ships' rudders, and small sparks illustrate the power of the tongue. Read James 3:1-12.

## Home Daily Bible Readings

<b>MONDAY</b> , August 17	"It Is Unwise Not to Listen to Teachers"	(Proverbs 5:7-14)
<b>TUESDAY</b> , August 18	"The Testimony of a Wise Teacher"	(Isaiah 50:4-11)
<b>WEDNESDAY</b> , August 19	"Slander and Abusive Language Are Not Allowed"	(Colossians 3:1-11)
<b>THURSDAY</b> , August 20	"Use the Tongue to Speak God's Praise"	(Psalm 119:169-176)
<b>FRIDAY</b> , August 21	"Believers Anointed with Fire and Tongues"	(Acts 2:1-12)
<b>SATURDAY</b> , August 22	"Tongues and Teachers Are God's Gifts"	(1 Corinthians 12:27-31)
<b>SUNDAY</b> , August 23	"Speech Is for Healing and Refreshment"	(James 3:1-12)

## Notes