

## FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

Bible Background – JAMES 2:14-26

Printed Text – JAMES 2:14-26

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?

<sup>15</sup> Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing,

<sup>16</sup> and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

<sup>17</sup> So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

<sup>18</sup> Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."

<sup>19</sup> You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.

<sup>20</sup> How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?

<sup>21</sup> Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

<sup>22</sup> You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete.

<sup>23</sup> And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God.

<sup>24</sup> So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup> Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road.

<sup>26</sup> Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.

-----New Living Translation

### Lesson Introduction

"Faith in action," or dead faith": what do these phrases mean? In this lesson we will compare and contrast a faith that is no more than empty talk and one that is demonstrated by actions and deeds. Sometimes it may seem that James' epistle on faith and works is a contradiction of Paul's teachings in Ephesians 2:8-10 when he states that it is "by grace we are saved through faith—not by works." But through further analysis, we see that there is no contradiction at all. Where faith is indeed a gift from God, works are a natural expression of that faith—two sides of the same coin.

**Background:** James, the brother of Jesus Christ, is popularly agreed as the author of this epistle. The date of James is difficult to ascertain, but the epistle must have been

written before AD 62 when James was martyred, with AD 44-48 being the most probable date of writing. James' audience was the Jewish-Christians who he described as "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1). They were scattered as a result of the persecution that ensued after the death of Stephen (Acts 7:54-58). The emerging attitudes of these Jewish-Christians necessitated the writing of this letter. These attitudes included oppression of the poor (5:1-6), religious superficiality (1:22-27), discrimination (2:1-13) and bitterness (3:1-12, 4:1-3). The passage for today seems to contradict Paul's teaching that salvation is by faith alone. It was a stumbling block to Martin Luther, who could not reconcile Paul and James on the issue of faith and works. James' letter is not about salvation, however, but argues against a faith that is alone—a faith stripped of practical responses of gratitude to God for salvation. While Paul's argument is that justification is by faith alone, it is clear from the rest of his teaching that this faith is not alone. It needs to be "worked out with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

-----*Precepts for Living*, the UMI Annual Commentary 2019-2020, p. 583

### **Work: Evidence of Faith**

**James 2:14-19:** In these verses, James seems to be saying that faith without the works of righteousness to go with it is not authentic. He shares a scenario of a person who sees someone in need of food or clothing. This person sends the needy on their way with good wishes but does not lift a finger to help relieve their plight. This type of faith (belief) is dead and useless. This type of faith bears no fruit. Even though one may argue that some have "faith" and some have "good deeds". But this is a false dichotomy. This is no "either-or" situation. Faith and the good works of righteousness that follow, go together like hand and glove. There is no separation of the two. *The Message* puts it this way, "Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?" The evidence of authentic faith is shown by the acts of obedience that follow.

◆ *If a person does nothing for the physical needs of another because they are unable to help, is the person's faith a dead faith?*

### **Those Who Accompanied Their Faith with Works**

**James 2:19-26:** James continues his argument by offering examples from the ancestors of those who demonstrated their faith in God through their obedient actions. He recounts the faith demonstrated in the action of Abraham offering Isaac as a sacrifice on the altar. (Genesis 22:1-19) Abraham was not justified by this action but by the faith that produced it. Even though Isaac was the son of promise that God had made to the elderly couple, Abraham's action through faith showed he was willing to sacrifice Isaac on the altar. This was a tangible deed of obedience that demonstrated Abraham's faith.

The second example James uses of how faith and works go hand in hand is the story of the prostitute Rahab. She was quite different from Abraham in circumstances. She was not a Jew, but a gentile. She did not have a long developed personal relationship with God but knew of his faithfulness to his chosen people by hearsay. She was not called by God, as Abraham had been,

but her life was headed for destruction. However, similar to Abraham, she acted on the faith she had, risked her life to save the lives of the Hebrew spies (Joshua 2:1-21). (Both Abraham and Rahab were in the ancestral line of Jesus Christ.) James concludes his argument by stating that just as the body separated from the spirit is dead, so is faith without righteous works to sustain it.

◆ *How would you reconcile Paul and James on this issue of faith and works? Think of a situation where you accompanied your faith with action?*

### **Conclusion**

In today's society it is sometimes challenging to assist those who approach us for help. We should be reminded to help when we can and that sometimes failure to do so is an indication of lacking faith. When you know of a believer's need and only offer words of encouragement without helping to attend to that need, you demonstrate inauthentic faith. Also, personal faith in Jesus for salvation without social justice is dead. There are ways to demonstrate our faith by action. Helping the homeless, those who suffer food insecurity, visiting the sick and the prisoners, speaking out for the persecuted are all ways of authenticating our faith.

### **Sources:**

*Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation, Carol Stream, Illinois.

Nickelson, R. L. (Ed.). (2019). Many Faces of Wisdom. *Standard Lesson Commentary*, 67 (Summer Quarter), 426-431. Standard Publishing, Colorado Springs, CO.

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## **Lesson for Next Week – August 23, 2020 – Study Guide 12**

### **Taming the Tongue**

Bible Background ♦ JAMES 3:1-12

Printed Text ♦ JAMES 3:1-12

Devotional Reading ♦ ISAIAH 50:4-11