

# JAMES

## LIVING FAITH



### Genuine Faith Loves Doing Good

James 2:14-26



## Introduction

The most important question you can answer correctly is “how can I be reconciled to God even though I have sinned against Him?” Your answer to that question will determine your *eternal* existence. Five hundred years ago this answer was hotly debated by the Roman Catholic theologians and the Reformers. Salvation itself was at stake. The church’s unity was at stake. Souls hung in the balance because the gospel was at stake.

These two groups debate the role of faith and works in the salvation and life of the Christian. The Reformers insisted on *sola fide* (“faith alone”). The Catholics insisted on a works-righteousness system through the sacraments of the church (baptism, penance, mass, etc.). They had also devised a system that would let people out of purgatory quicker based on the leftover good works of Mary and the saints. Some of the deceased saints’ extra good works (called “merits”) were like a spiritual supplement that could be yours if you gave money to the church. The gospel was lost. The Reformers returned to the Bible as the only authority (“*sola Scriptura*”) where the doctrine of justification by God’s grace alone through faith alone was recovered. The Protestant church was born. The biblical teaching on the importance and role of faith *and* good works was rescued from dangerous confusion. Joy returned to Christianity.

One of the passages the medieval Roman Catholic theologians used to argue against justification through faith alone was James 2:14-26. So were they right? Did the Reformers get it wrong? Is salvation a combination of faith and works? If not, then are good works any good at all?



## Study

*Context:* In James 2:1-13, he spoke about favoritism based on socioeconomic lines in the church. He said that this kind of judgment is without mercy and is clear disobedience to the summary of the royal law: love your neighbor as yourself. James desperately wants a Christian’s life and behavior to line up with what they believe about God. James continues this conversation in this week’s passage on loving works (2:14-26) and next week’s passage on godly words (3:1-12). For James, genuine faith is demonstrated through works and words. Maturity is defined by obedient, loving works and godly speech.



*The kind of “faith” that even demons have (2:18-20)*

3. In vv.18-20 James quotes a piece of bad theology that separates faith and works so that he can correct it. Again, James is making the point that godly actions/works is important because it *demonstrates* that someone’s faith is genuine. Focus on v.19. What do you think he is trying to help his readers understand?

**APPLY →** There is a danger that good theology stays locked away in the head and is never expressed through our actions. Christianity always starts with right beliefs but never ends there. It starts with doctrine but then moves on quickly to discipleship. There is a wonderful truth to the children’s song *This Little Light of Mine I’m Gonna Let It Shine*. So, write out a few things you’ve been learning recently about the Bible from a sermon, conversation, book or the Bible itself. How might this knowledge be put into action in your home, workplace, neighborhood or other context?

*Two examples that genuine faith is active faith (2:21-26)*

4. Read James 2:21-24 and then compare it to what Paul says in Galatians 2:15-3:8. Although a quick read might make you think they are contradicting each other, a closer read reveals this is not the case. If James is saying that godly action demonstrates genuine faith, then what is Paul saying in Galatians? What are some important differences in the points they are making? [See *Theological Connections* for help.]
5. Rahab was a prostitute. Not only was she a prostitute, but she was a Canaanite. Canaanites were well known for being especially evil. Yet she trusted in Israel’s God and demonstrated her faith through action. It’s an amazing story you can read in Joshua 2. Compare what you know about Abraham with what you know about Rahab. Why, out of all the Old Testament examples, do you think James would use a Gentile prostitute to make his point?

**APPLY** → James uses Rahab intentionally. He could've picked hundreds of other examples of people who had a genuine faith demonstrated by loving actions. But he picks a prostitute who used to be a member of the wicked Canaanites. Grace turns a person like Rahab into an example of genuine faith! We've been thinking about godly action throughout this study. Take a moment to think about the all-encompassing, radically transformative grace of God in the gospel. Think about your life before Christ and list some of the ways God's grace has changed you.

**APPLY** → After studying a passage about the importance of good works in our Christian lives, what are some practical ways your inward faith in Christ can be outwardly demonstrated through good works this week?



## Connect

**Gospel Connections.** Paul spells out the gospel message beautifully in Ephesians 2:1-10:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup>among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup>But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup>not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are his workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

As it relates to James 2:14-26, did you notice what Paul says in verse 10? Both Paul and James understand good works as the result and fruit of genuine faith in Christ.

**Whole-Bible Connections.** Abraham was justified through faith in the promise of God (Gen. 15:6). Way back in the early pages of the Bible we see a sinner called out of this world and called to trust in God's saving promise. Paul says it this way, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'" (Gal. 3:8). James makes the point that many years later Abraham's faith was proven to be genuine through his obedient action in Genesis 22.

Rahab also put her faith in God when she heard of Israel's God. She said, "For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Josh. 2:10-11). Her faith in God was demonstrated and proved to be true when she, at the risk of her own life, protected Israelites (Josh. 2:14-16).

**Theological Connections.** Words are ambiguous and confusing apart from context. For example, "football" means an entire different sport in England than it does in America. The word in its context helps us understand what it means. The same is true for the different ways James and Paul use the word "justification." Theologically, justification is the work of God where, based on the righteousness of Jesus credited to the sinner through faith, the sinner is declared by God as being righteous under the Law (Rom. 4:3; 5:1,9; Gal. 2:16; 3:11). James believes this because he quotes Genesis 15:6 which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." But James wants to do more here than define justification. He is asking the question, "how do you know if someone's faith has justified them?" In other words, how do you know if someone's faith is genuine. His answer: look at their life. People with faith in Christ live like Christ. In this sense James is saying, "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24). A person's faith is vindicated or proved by the godly fruit it produces much like a tomato seed is vindicated or proved to be a tomato seed when it produces tomatoes.

Paul, on the other hand, is arguing against a different misunderstanding of justification when he writes Romans and Galatians. Paul wrote to people who thought they could earn God's favor through keeping the Law. Since we are all sinners, we can't keep the Law, Paul argues. And even if you keep 99% of the Law, if you fail in 1% then you are still a sinner deserving God's holy judgment. Rather, we are justified by Christ alone through faith alone. Jesus fulfills the Law for us in His sinless, righteous life and that is only credited to us through trusting in God's free grace.

### ***Praise Connections.***

#### **Take my Life and Let it Be**

Take my life and let it be  
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.  
Take my moments and my days,  
Let them flow in endless praise.

Take my hands and let them move  
At the impulse of Thy love.  
Take my feet and let them be  
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice and let me sing,  
Always, only for my King.  
Take my lips and let them be  
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold,  
Not a mite would I withhold.  
Take my intellect and use  
Every pow'r as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it Thine,  
It shall be no longer mine.  
Take my heart, it is Thine own,  
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour  
At Thy feet its treasure store.  
Take myself and I will be  
Ever, only, all for Thee.

*Frances R. Havergal, 1874*