

Bible Study Lesson: Faith That Works

Scripture: James 2:14–26 (NIV)

Theme: Genuine faith in Jesus Christ is revealed through obedient, compassionate action.

Key verse: James 2:17

Estimated teaching time: 40–45 minutes

Lesson objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should understand:

1. The difference between professed faith and living faith.
2. Why good works cannot earn salvation but must follow genuine salvation.
3. How practical compassion demonstrates Christian faith.
4. What Abraham and Rahab teach about courageous obedience.
5. How to examine whether our faith is active, growing, and productive.

1. Opening discussion — 5 minutes

Begin by asking:

“Which speaks more convincingly: what a person says or what that person consistently does?”

Words are important, but actions reveal whether our words are trustworthy.

A person can say, “I love you,” but never show concern. Someone can say, “I believe in healthy living,” but ignore every healthy practice. A church can say, “We care about our community,” while doing nothing about the suffering around it.

James applies this principle to our relationship with God.

A person may say, “I have faith,” but James asks an important question: **What evidence shows that this faith is alive?**

James is not teaching that we earn salvation by good works. He is teaching that saving faith does not remain alone. Genuine faith produces evidence.

The central message of this passage is:

We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith does not remain alone.

Have someone read James 2:14–26 aloud from the NIV.

2. The question James asks — James 2:14 — 5 minutes

James begins with two questions:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?”

Notice that James does not say the person actually possesses genuine faith. He says the person **claims** to have faith.

The issue is not faith versus works. The issue is genuine faith versus an empty claim.

The second question is:

“Can such faith save them?”

The phrase “such faith” is important. James is describing a supposed faith that produces no evidence, obedience, compassion, or transformation.

He is not asking whether genuine faith in Christ can save. Scripture clearly teaches that it can. He is asking whether a lifeless profession of faith can save.

The expected answer is no.

Profession and possession

There is a difference between professing faith and possessing faith.

A person may:

- Know Christian vocabulary.
- Attend worship services.
- Carry a Bible.
- Hold a church office.
- Sing gospel songs.
- Discuss theology.
- Identify as a Christian.

None of these activities, by themselves, prove that a person has surrendered to Christ.

Jesus warned that not everyone who calls Him “Lord” genuinely belongs to Him. Faith must be more than religious language.

Discussion questions

1. Why is it possible to say the right religious words without experiencing a changed heart?
2. What is the difference between church involvement and genuine discipleship?
3. What kinds of evidence should appear in the life of someone who trusts Christ?

3. Faith must respond to human need — James 2:15–17 — 7 minutes

James gives a practical example. A brother or sister lacks adequate clothing and daily food. Another believer sees the need and says:

“Go in peace; keep warm and well fed.”

The words sound spiritual and compassionate, but nothing is actually given.

James asks, **“What good is it?”**

The hungry person cannot eat our good intentions. The cold person cannot wear our kind words. A prayer spoken without a willingness to help—when we possess the ability to help—may become an excuse for avoiding responsibility.

Compassion must become action

James is not criticizing prayer or encouraging us to meet every need by ourselves. No individual or congregation has unlimited resources.

He is confronting the hypocrisy of seeing a genuine need, having the capacity to assist, and offering only empty religious words.

Biblical compassion asks:

- Can I provide food?
- Can I provide clothing?
- Can I offer transportation?
- Can I help someone find employment?
- Can I connect this person with appropriate resources?
- Can I advocate for someone being treated unjustly?
- Can our congregation respond collectively?

Prayer should not replace obedience. Prayer should prepare and empower us to obey.

“Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”

Dead faith is inactive and unproductive. It may have religious language, but it has no spiritual life.

A living tree produces fruit because life is present within it. The fruit does not give the tree life; it demonstrates that the tree is alive.

In the same way, good works do not give us salvation. They demonstrate that God’s saving life is working within us.

Personal and systemic compassion

Faith responds to individuals, but it should also examine the conditions creating repeated suffering.

It is good to feed a hungry family. Living faith may also ask:

- Why are so many working families unable to afford food?
- Are people being denied fair wages or equal opportunities?
- Are certain neighborhoods systematically deprived of resources?
- Are public policies protecting vulnerable people or increasing their hardship?
- What can the church do beyond temporary relief?

Christian compassion includes charity, but it should not be limited to charity. Faith may also require advocacy, truth-telling, and the pursuit of justice.

Discussion questions

1. Why are words sometimes easier to offer than practical assistance?
2. When can saying “I’ll pray for you” become an excuse for inaction?
3. What needs in our community require both compassionate service and public advocacy?

4. Faith cannot be separated from works — James 2:18 — 5 minutes

James imagines someone saying:

“You have faith; I have deeds.”

This person attempts to divide Christianity into two specialties. One person believes; another person serves.

James rejects this separation:

“Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.”

Faith is invisible. We cannot look directly into someone’s heart. Faith becomes visible through its effects.

We see faith when someone:

- Forgives an offender.
- Tells the truth when lying would be easier.
- Gives generously during another person’s crisis.
- Resists temptation.
- Defends someone being mistreated.
- Serves without seeking recognition.
- Obeys God despite personal cost.
- Continues trusting during suffering.

Good works are not a substitute for faith. They are faith made visible.

Illustration

We cannot see the wind, but we can see trees moving and flags waving. The movement does not create the wind; it reveals that the wind is present.

Likewise, we cannot directly see faith in the heart, but we can see the obedience and compassion that faith produces.

Discussion question

If someone observed our lives for one week without hearing our religious language, what evidence of faith would they see?

5. Belief without surrender — James 2:19–20 — 5 minutes

James writes:

“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”

Believing that God exists is not the same as trusting and obeying God.

Demons possess correct information about God. They know:

- God exists.
- Jesus is the Son of God.
- Jesus has divine authority.
- Judgment is coming.
- They are accountable to Him.

Their theology produces fear, but not loving obedience.

Intellectual belief versus saving faith

Saving faith includes knowledge, but it goes beyond knowledge.

Biblical faith involves:

- Understanding the truth about Jesus.
- Accepting that the gospel is true.
- Trusting Christ personally.
- Surrendering to His authority.
- Following Him through obedient living.

A person can believe facts about an airplane without boarding it. Trust is demonstrated when the person enters the aircraft and allows it to carry them.

Similarly, it is possible to believe facts about Jesus without entrusting our lives to Him.

Discussion questions

1. Why is correct information about God insufficient by itself?
2. What is the difference between believing that Jesus lived and trusting Jesus as Savior and Lord?
3. Has our knowledge of God produced surrender, or merely familiarity with religion?

6. Abraham: faith proven through obedience — James 2:21–24 — 7 minutes

James now turns to Abraham, one of the most respected figures in Jewish history.

He refers to Genesis 22, when God commanded Abraham to offer his son Isaac. This was an extraordinary test because Isaac was the child through whom God had promised to build a nation.

James explains that Abraham's faith and actions worked together:

“His faith was made complete by what he did.”

Abraham was already a believer

Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham believed God, and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. That occurred before the events of Genesis 22.

Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac did not create his faith. It demonstrated and matured the faith he already possessed.

His actions proved that he trusted God even when God's command was difficult to understand.

According to Hebrews 11, Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac from the dead if necessary. He trusted God's promise and character.

Faith that costs nothing proves little

It is easy to claim that we trust God when obedience requires no sacrifice.

Faith becomes visible when obedience affects:

- Our comfort
- Our money
- Our relationships
- Our reputation
- Our ambitions
- Our security
- Our plans for the future

Abraham held nothing back from God—not even the son he loved.

God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and provided a ram. The incident anticipated the gospel: God ultimately gave His own Son for our salvation.

“A friend of God”

Abraham's obedient trust demonstrated the reality of his relationship with God. Scripture calls him God's friend.

Friendship with God involves more than warm feelings. It involves trusting His word and honoring His authority.

Discussion questions

1. What made Abraham's obedience especially difficult?
2. How can difficult obedience strengthen and mature faith?
3. Is there something we claim to have surrendered to God while still tightly controlling it?

7. Rahab: faith expressed through courage — James 2:25 — 6 minutes

James then introduces Rahab.

Abraham and Rahab were dramatically different:

Abraham	Rahab
Man	Woman
Hebrew	Gentile
Respected patriarch	Social outsider
Wealthy	Vulnerable
Known for his relationship with God	Known for a sinful past

Yet both were included as examples of genuine faith.

This demonstrates that living faith is available to anyone. Our past, gender, ethnicity, social position, or reputation does not place us beyond God's grace.

Rahab's story

Joshua 2 records that Rahab lived in Jericho. When Israelite spies entered the city, she hid and protected them.

Rahab had heard what God had done for Israel. She concluded that Israel's God was the true God of heaven and earth.

Her belief became action. By protecting the spies, she risked her life and committed herself to God's people.

Rahab's faith:

- Recognized the true God.
- Rejected her city's opposition to Him.
- Took a personal risk.
- Protected God's servants.
- Changed the direction of her life.

Rahab and her family were spared when Jericho fell. She eventually became part of Israel and appears in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1.

Grace did not merely rescue Rahab from destruction. Grace gave her a place in God's redemptive story.

A necessary clarification

Scripture does not approve of every detail of Rahab's conduct. The emphasis is on her courageous decision to trust Israel's God and protect His people.

God receives imperfect people whose faith turns them toward Him. None of the biblical heroes were flawless. Their hope, like ours, rested in God's grace.

Discussion questions

1. What risks did Rahab take because of her faith?
2. What does Rahab's inclusion teach us about God's grace?
3. When might following Christ require us to take an unpopular or costly stand?

8. The body and the spirit — James 2:26 — 3 minutes

James concludes:

“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

A body without breath or spirit has no life. It may retain its outward form, but it cannot function.

Likewise, a dead profession of faith may retain religious appearances:

- Church language

- Traditions
- Membership
- Titles
- Ceremonies

But without spiritual life, it produces no lasting obedience or fruit.

Works are not an optional accessory added to faith. They are the evidence that faith is alive.

9. Do James and Paul disagree? — 4 minutes

Some readers believe James contradicts Paul.

Paul teaches that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law. James says that a person is shown to be righteous by what they do and not by an empty profession alone.

They are addressing different errors.

Paul confronts legalism

Legalism says:

“I can earn salvation through my works.”

Paul answers:

“No. Salvation is a gift received through faith.”

James confronts empty profession

Empty profession says:

“Because I claim to believe, my actions do not matter.”

James answers:

“No. Genuine faith produces a changed life.”

Paul explains the **root** of salvation: faith in Christ.

James explains the **fruit** of salvation: obedient works.

Paul asks, “How is a sinner made right with God?”

James asks, “How is genuine faith demonstrated?”

They agree completely: works cannot save us, but the faith that saves us produces works.

Ephesians 2:8–10 brings both truths together. We are saved by grace through faith—not by works—but we are also created in Christ to do good works.

10. Practical application — 5 minutes

James challenges us to examine whether our faith is alive.

1. Living faith sees people in need

It refuses to look away from hunger, poverty, loneliness, discrimination, illness, or injustice.

2. Living faith takes action

It asks, “What can I do with the resources, influence, time, and abilities God has given me?”

3. Living faith obeys when obedience is costly

Abraham trusted God with what was most precious to him. Rahab risked her safety to stand with God’s people.

4. Living faith welcomes transformation

Faith does not leave us exactly where it found us. God changes our priorities, behavior, relationships, and use of resources.

5. Living faith points to Jesus

Good works are not performed so we can boast. They should direct attention toward God’s goodness and the transforming power of Christ.

Closing reflection

Ask participants to consider silently:

1. Is my faith primarily something I discuss, or something I live?
2. What evidence shows that my relationship with Christ is changing me?
3. Have I offered encouraging words when God expected practical assistance?
4. What need has God placed directly in front of me?
5. Is there an act of obedience I have delayed because it is uncomfortable or costly?
6. Are my works motivated by gratitude for salvation or an attempt to earn God’s approval?
7. If my faith were judged only by my actions, what conclusion would someone reach?

Conclusion

James does not ask whether we can explain faith. He asks whether our faith is alive.

Dead faith talks but does not act.

Dead faith sees suffering but remains uninvolved.

Dead faith knows religious facts but refuses to surrender.

Dead faith claims to trust God but avoids costly obedience.

Living faith responds.

Abraham's faith climbed the mountain.

Rahab's faith opened her home.

Compassionate faith feeds the hungry and clothes those in need.

Courageous faith stands with the vulnerable.

Obedient faith trusts God when the cost is high.

We are not saved because we perform good works. We perform good works because God, by grace, has saved and transformed us.

Our works are not the price of salvation. They are the evidence of salvation.

Faith is the root.

Works are the fruit.

Jesus Christ is the source of both.

Closing prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for saving us by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Forgive us when our words have been greater than our actions and when we have used religious language to avoid responsibility.

Open our eyes to the needs around us. Give us compassionate hearts, generous hands, courageous voices, and obedient lives. Teach us to serve without trying to earn Your love or attract attention to ourselves.

Give us Abraham's willingness to trust You with what is most precious. Give us Rahab's courage to stand with Your people despite personal risk. Help us confront hunger, injustice, loneliness, and suffering with more than good intentions.

May our works demonstrate that our faith is alive, and may everything we do point others toward Jesus Christ. In His name, amen.