



# Study Series

James: Week Five

## Bible

James 2:14-26 (NIV)

### Faith and Deeds

**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.

**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.

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.

## *Sermon Summary*

You may want to consider this section as pre-reading.

In 2:14-26 James addresses the inseparability of faith and works. This topic has led to much theological hand-wringing about the apparent conflict here between James and Paul (compare Romans 3:28 and James 2:24), but we must remember that James and Paul are addressing different issues faced by different groups of Christians and the 'conflict' between them is not nearly as significant as is sometimes imagined. The more important thing for us to grapple with is what sort of Christian community would think that faith and actions can be separated? For James is not teaching anything new.

In the Old Testament the prophets criticise the people of Israel for actions that were not in-line with their faith; John the Baptist urged those who came to him to produce fruit in keeping with repentance; Jesus taught the importance of actions; and so does Paul. How could a community of believers think that actions could be separated from faith or, to put it another way, that faith could stand alone? Well, remember that James is writing to a group of believers who are experiencing opposition and persecution. It is very tempting in that situation to turn down the volume, so to speak, on actions that draw negative attention to you. James has been urging his readers to continue to live their faith "out loud" throughout the letter and this is no different. And he can't be much clearer.

Faith without works, James asserts, cannot save, it is useless, and dead. It's as useful as expressing a hope to a homeless person that they find work and stay warm and well fed, without helping them to actually get a job and find enough to eat. A faith that can only be described, is essentially demonic. Even demons have faith, but their actions make clear that they are not interested in joining the church. And, for a Jewish-Christian community the examples of Abraham and Rahab demonstrate his point; that faith and actions work together and that people are justified by what they do. To be justified is to be declared righteous and here we have an important distinction between Paul and James that might be worth noting. Paul uses "justify" in a judicial sense; that God declares a person to be righteous on the basis of their faith in Jesus. James uses it in its more usual moral sense;

that God declares a person to be righteous on the basis of their righteousness (works). Abraham consistently acted righteously and, therefore, God declared him to be righteous (not perfect, just someone who lived 'rightly'). James wants his hearers to let their faith and deeds work together in synergy, so that they might be "justified"; as those who live rightly as followers of Jesus. To a group of believers who were under pressure to hide their actions to avoid persecution this is a real challenge, and it remains important for us too. We can feel the same pressure, and sometimes even the desire, to live in the unthreatened comfort of a personal, internalised, and private faith. Speaking into this reality, James invites us to hear and grapple with this message today.

## Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: In what circumstances do we remain silent about things we might believe strongly? Try to think more widely than just your Christian beliefs. When might this silence be helpful and appropriate, and when might it not be? Take some time to share your observations with the group.
2. Pause to read James chapter 2:14-26. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain *why* it jumped out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Share what you've been lead to.
3. One of the outcomes of a private faith is that our public life is essentially one of being "good" or "nice" rather than "new". Why is merely being "good" or "nice" a serious reduction of God's plans for us?
4. Our actions are linked to our faith and what we believe shapes our actions. If we believe that God's big goal is for us to be happy, which it isn't, we will tend to act in ways that reinforce what is best for us rather than what is best for others. We believe that God has saved us in Christ in order that we might participate with Him in His mission of renewing everything; bringing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. What sorts of action will follow this belief?

5. Following on from the previous question, what do our quiet actions suggest that we believe?
6. Recognising that our actions are shaped by our beliefs, what might need to change or grow about what we believe to increase the volume of our faith this week? What 'works' might God be specifically inviting us to step into?

## *Prayer*

Take some time now to reflect on your answers to question 6. Pray for each other, that the Holy Spirit would lead us into bolder, more awe inspired beliefs, that our works might increasingly reflect the transformation of a life lived following Jesus.