

## Faith without Works Is Dead

### *A Present-Day Illustration*

Henrietta?" Henrietta turned and saw Shandrice, a sister of one of her friends.

"What are you doing here? I didn't know you were in the medical field," said Shandrice. Henrietta was attending the American Red Cross's first aid and certification class.

"I'm preparing for my home healthcare agency business when I retire," said Henrietta.

"Home healthcare? You can never have too many good ones," said a woman standing nearby.

"We took care of my grandmother at home until she died three years ago," said Henrietta. "I saw how much of a need there is in providing good services to caregivers. So, I prayed about it, and felt I had a green light."

"I admire you," said the woman who was standing nearby. "So many people say they want to do something, but stop short of actually acting."

"I have my business plan," offered Henrietta. "I have secured office space in a nice location, and made contacts for my administrative staff, registered nurses, and certified assistants."

"Would you like the name of another good certified nursing assistant?" smiled Shandrice.

"I would love to consider you," said Henrietta.

"Great. I'm looking for a good employer," said Shandrice. "I wish I could have faith like yours. It's so hard for me to believe sometimes."

"God will do great things for you," replied Henrietta. "Have faith in Him—and step out!"

- 1.** *How do you prove you truly believe in something?*
- 2.** *What does believing in Jesus mean to you?*
- 3.** *How would other people know that you believe in Jesus?*

## A True Faith Responds

*James 2:14-17, 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.

*James 2:14-17, NIV*

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup>Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>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? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Evidently, James had observed some people within the early churches who professed to be followers of Christ but whose faith rarely translated into action. James was quite blunt about these people; he stated that their faith was dead. Actually, through biblical examples, James tried to persuade his readers, some who might have held fallacious ideas about their faith, to alter their understanding and behavior about faith so that they would have a truly living faith in the Lord.

In verses 14-17, James describes a person who claims to be a follower of Jesus, yet fails to respond to the severest of needs. James does not deny the fact that God saves us by grace through faith alone, but questions the validity of a faith that does not respond to one in dire need of help. The immediate needs of the believer in verse 15 are severe. Without clothing for warmth and nourishment, this brother or sister in Christ is not likely to even survive.

The scenario continues with one of James's readers offering a fine-sounding platitude without offering any assistance. Although fully aware of the urgent need, this professing believer wishes that someone else would fill the void and offer food

and clothing to the needy believer, but takes no action to relieve the suffering.

The question at the end of verse 16 emphasizes the deadness of the faith of one who does not step in to relieve the dire need of a fellow saint. His or her words amount to nothing more than a worthless smokescreen covering up a dead faith.

A true living faith responds to such a need because Christ has already redeemed that person and thus changed the person's heart. The behavior of the professing Christian proved that his or her faith was never real.

**4.** *Why do you think James uses such an extreme example of destitution in verse 15?*

**5.** *What does the response of the person in verse 16 demonstrate about his or her faith?*

## A True Faith Works

*James 2:18-20, KJV*

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.

20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

*James 2:18-20, NIV*

<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

<sup>20</sup>You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

In response to James's questioning the reality of a faith that does not respond to the severest of needs, an objector appears in verse 18. This person asserts that beliefs and works are equally valid expressions of one's faith; in other words, one can have correct beliefs without works. James does not dismiss the significance of possessing correct theology, but denies that one can have saving faith with no visible life change. The dissenter

cannot prove the reality of faith by words without such a change in behavior. James, however, can point to his works as evidence that he is truly a “new creation” in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). His life validates the reality of his claim.

To illustrate his point, James points to the demons that possess an orthodox belief in the oneness of God. Not only that, but they shudder in fear whenever confronted with that reality. They demonstrate that good theology alone and a correct appraisal of God do not imply saving faith.

James dismisses the objector “foolish” since he fails to see “that faith without deeds is useless” or of any saving value (vs. 20). A genuine new birth leads to a change of behavior.

**6.** *What is the contention of the objector to James’s claim regarding the necessity of works?*

**7.** *How does James respond to the claim that correct beliefs are equal to a change in behavior in proving the reality of a living faith?*

## A True Faith Passes the Test

*James 2:21-26, KJV*

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.

*James 2:21-26, NIV*

<sup>21</sup>Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup>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.

<sup>24</sup>You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup>In the same way, was not

*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*

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? <sup>26</sup>As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

The Jewish recipients of this letter knew all about the faith of Abraham and his offering of Isaac (see Gen. 22). He obeyed God to the point of raising his knife before an angel of the Lord stopped him from killing his son. What is James telling us with this example? Is he saying that this was the moment of salvation for Abraham?

No, he is not. Verse 22 confirms this, as James points out “his faith and actions were working together.” Abraham’s obedience confirmed the reality of faith God recognized thirty years earlier (see Genesis 15:6). The offering of Isaac was not the beginning of his faith, but the passing of a severe test of it.

Taken out of context, some might use verse 24 to prove we are justified on the basis of our works. That, however, would contradict what James just said in verse 22 regarding faith and actions “working together” in the case of Abraham.

Rahab demonstrated her belief in God by hiding the Jewish spies that had entered Jericho (Josh. 2:8-13). She also showed her faith by asking for deliverance when Israel defeated Jericho. Both Abraham and Rahab displayed the reality of their faith through the actions each took.

James concluded by drawing an analogy between the body and spirit and faith and works. Any human body that no longer has a spirit, or what the Old Testament calls the “soul” (Hebrew, *nephesh*, lifebreath), is dead in the clinical sense. Faith without works is like a lifeless corpse. It is not until God breathes into our faith the “spirit” of “works,” that it becomes truly alive.

**8.** *How do faith and behavior work together in a vital walk with the Lord, as verse 22 suggests?*

## Withered or Fruitful?

One morning, on His way to Jerusalem from Bethany, Jesus observed a fig tree by the side of a road. The Lord was hungry, but He found no fruit on the tree, and so He cursed it. The tree then withered, which amazed His disciples (see Matt. 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14, 20-25). An important question is why Jesus told the tree that it would never bear fruit again.

When read in context, this story links to Jesus' cleansing the temple of the money changers and the dove sellers (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17). What angered Jesus was not just the money changers' predatory exchange rates for coins or that dove sellers were making an outlandish profit selling doves for sacrifices. What angered Him more was what was not going on in the temple. The most spiritual "fruit" in all of Israel should have been found in His Father's house, the temple, where people came to repent of their sins, pray, and renew their relationship with God. What Jesus found instead was a noisy bazaar—lots of activity, but none of it worshipful or "fruitful." The temple had become a business, not a place of worship. It was like a fig tree with lots of leaves, but no fruit. So, the Lord showed His followers that they must bear fruit for the kingdom of God lest they spiritually wither like the fig tree.

We too are called to be fruitful servants of the Lord. Bearing fruit is not only an indication of who we are but also of what we do. And just as Jesus was a perfect example of a fruit-bearing servant of God, so also we must humbly serve others by wisely caring for their needs. Truly, a genuine faith in Jesus is shown in our good works.

**9.** *Why does God want us to do more than believe in Him, go to church, and pray when we need something?*

**10.** *What is the Lord hungry to see in us?*

**11.** *When we do not match our beliefs with actions, what happens to our relationship with Him?*

**12.** *What miracles can occur when we exercise our faith in helping others who are in need?*

## A Pledge to Do Good

The wisdom of James's contrast between a living faith and a dead faith should be an encouragement to all those who answer Jesus' call to minister to the needs of others and a warning to those who claim to be Christians but do not respond to His call. What would happen if all those who say they believe in Christ actually performed good works for the Lord? How would the world be changed for the better?

► *Select a Bible verse or verses about living out your faith, write the Scripture here, and pledge to fulfill what that Scripture is telling you to do, starting this week.*

### KEY VERSE

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead. —James 2:26, KJV

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

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

#### Week of August 17 through August 23

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Proverbs 5:7-14—Unwise Not to Listen to Teachers.
- Tues.** Isaiah 50:4-11—The Testimony of a Wise Teacher.
- Wed.** Colossians 3:1-11—Slander and Abusive Language Not Allowed.
- Thurs.** Psalm 119:169-176—Use Your Tongue to Speak God's Praise.
- Fri.** Acts 2:1-12—Believers Are Anointed with Fire and Tongues.
- Sat.** 1 Corinthians 12:27-31—Tongues and Teachers Are God's Gifts.
- Sun.** James 3:1-12—Speech Is for Healing and Refreshment.