GROUP GUIDE

BRENTWOOD BAPTIST

Trials and Maturity

faith and works

james 2:14-26

may 4, 2025

MAIN POINT

True faith in God will express itself in deeds.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Begin the group session by serving two food items that go especially well together. Peanut butter and jelly would be a good example, or something like strawberries and chocolate. Ask the following questions as the group enjoys the snacks:

What are some other examples of foods that complement each other especially well?

What are some food combinations that seem disgusting, but actually taste pretty good?

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Watch the Session 4 Video featuring ben stuart.

What did you find most interesting or helpful in this week’s talk?

Have a volunteer read James 2:14-18.

How would you summarize the primary message of these verses?

What’s the answer to James’s question in verse 14: “Can that faith save him?”

What’s the answer to James’s question in verse 16: “. . . what good is that?”

have three volunteers Read Romans 3:27-28, 4:5-8, and 5:1-2.

How would you summarize Paul’s teaching on salvation and faith?

What does Paul have to say about the connection between faith and works?

How do we reconcile what Paul wrote with James’s words in verses 14-18?

So what are sure signs that we belong to God? How do we know we are His? The first we have already talked about: True faith always manifests itself in a love for people. It moves us to care for widows and orphans. It guides us to respect our brothers and sisters in lowly positions.

What’s the difference between loving people and attempting to earn salvation by doing good works? How can you know when you’re doing one over the other?

How have you experienced faith in God naturally transitioning into loving God and loving others?

have a volunteer Read James 2:19-26.

Look at verse 21. Was Abraham right with God before or after he offered up Isaac as a sacrifice? Explain your answer.

How did Abraham’s actions give evidence of his faith?

As a group, come up with a one-sentence description of the biblical relationship between faith and works.

We all need to be students of our own lives. As you look at your life, do you see faith working itself out in love? Do you see good works that positively influence the people in your community? Do you see a spiritual journey that’s marked by growth? These questions are vital to a healthy relationship with God.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How have you seen the relationship between faith and works play out in your life?

What are some practical ways you can love others this week through acts of service?

What are some roadblocks that keep you from loving others well? How can these roadblocks be overlooked?

PRAYER

Allow a time for group members to express their faith in God. This expression can be verbal or silent, but encourage participants to speak intentionally to God about all of the things they believe in faith to be true—things like salvation, the forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternal life, and so on. Take a few minutes to express your gratitude to God for His salvation.

Visit lifeway.com to purchase the Bible study book for more in-depth individual and group study.

COMMENTARY

james 2:14-18

2:14. Two rhetorical questions here expect negative answers. Three features of the questions are important. First, they accept the reader’s claim to faith, but do not assume that the claim without works represents saving faith. The absence of deeds of obedience in this person’s life makes the claim highly suspicious, if not outright wrong! Second, the topic is not faith in general but a specific kind of faith, one which has no deeds. Such in the NIV text implies this focus. The question is not, “Can faith save the lost?” Of course, faith saves the lost. The question is, “Can a faith without deeds save the lost?” The answer to that question is “no.”

2:15-16. These verses offer a parable in miniature, illustrating the person who has the type of faith that cannot save. Verse 15 pictures people who needed clothes and food. Cold and hungry, these believers desperately needed the necessities of life! Verse 16 shows how the person who claims to have faith approaches these needy people: with an offer of good wishes but no practical help.

2:17. Verse 17 concludes the matter. Good wishes consisting of mere talk are empty of all reality and lifeless. Offering only good wishes to the cold and the hungry serves to depress further those who are starving and chilled. They need more than good wishes. They need practical help.

2:18. Verse 18 represents a dialog with an imaginary opponent. The opponent says: You have faith; I have deeds. James responded: Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

romans 3:27-28

3:27-28. Paul enters into dialogue again with an imaginary opponent who is struggling with the idea that humans can contribute nothing to their own salvation. There is no room to boast when one is given a gift. Faith, in simple terms, is simply saying “Yes” to God’s gift of redemption and justification through Christ. Faith is agreeing with God that his plan of salvation is the one that saves. It is absolutely incongruous for a person to have faith and then boast about observing the law as an instrument of salvation. It would be the same as receiving a valuable birthday present and then insulting the giver by insisting on paying for it yourself. Once the item was paid for by you, it ceases to be a gift. Only when it is totally paid for by another, and received by you “by ‘Yes’ alone” (by faith alone), is it a gift. Only at that point is boasting excluded.

romans 4:5-8

4:5-8. The line of demarcation between wages and gifts is work. When one works, he or she gets what is deserved—wages come as an obligation. When one does not work, there is no obligation to be given anything. Anything that is received originates in grace and is delivered as a gift. Such is righteousness from God. Man’s work has been faulty (unrighteous); therefore, there is no obligation to be “paid” with a wage— credited as righteousness. If we are credited with righteousness, it is only because we have believed God’s assessment of our situation and his promises and received righteousness as a gift.

romans 5:1-2

When Paul says therefore, he is preparing to draw together the two key truths which have occupied his attention in the letter so far: the need for justification by God (Rom. 1:8-3:20) and the means of justification (“faith,” Rom. 3:21-4:25). Since we have been justified implies the need and the exercise of the solution. Perhaps the most telling turn of style in this verse could be easily overlooked: his use of we instead of “you” or “they.” In the first four chapters of Romans, “you” or “they” occurs (in English) seventy-seven times, while “we” occurs only fifteen times, and many of those are editorial uses. The significance of his change to first person language in Romans 5:1 is that he is now addressing content which applies to those who have been justified—believers in Christ—as opposed to those who needed to be justified—the pagan, the religious moralizer, and/or the Jew addressed in previous chapters.

james 2:19-26

Verse 19 speaks to the person claiming to have faith but lacking works. This kind of person merely gives intellectual assent to the creed of monotheism. This basic creed of Judaism appeared in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The statement is intellectually true, but it doesn’t proceed far enough. A person must believe in God to be a Christian, but not everyone who acknowledges the existence of God has made a commitment to Jesus Christ.

Verse 20 calls on the objector to recognize that the conclusions of verses 18-19 are correct while also introducing verses 21-26. James appeals to us to become learners. We can rephrase the question as: “Are you willing to be taught that a barren faith is worthless?”

James selected Abraham and Rahab as examples of people who showed genuine faith by their deeds. Their examples stand in complete contrast. Abraham was the ancestor of both Jews and Gentiles. He provided a sterling example of faith (Heb. 11:8-12). Rahab was a Gentile and a prostitute (Josh. 2:1-24), but Matthew listed her in the genealogy of Christ (Matt. 1:5). Although they came from different backgrounds, both showed the reality of their faith.

Verse 21 picks up the Old Testament incident in which Abraham showed his willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-18). Verse 23 refers to the incident in which “Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6), which took place at least thirty years before that of Genesis 22.

Verse 22 states two facts about Abraham’s faith. First, his faith and his actions were working together. Abraham’s faith prompted his obedience. It prodded him on to do good works. Second, his faith was made complete by what he did. His obedience demonstrated the integrity of his faith. This is not to say that previously Abraham had a weak faith. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac vividly demonstrated the existence of true faith.

Verse 23 summarizes the entire process. Abraham’s willingness to offer Isaac fulfilled the promise of Genesis 15:6. Abraham’s obedience showed he was a righteous man. God declared Abraham righteous as a matter of grace. Abraham showed the reality of this righteousness by his actions in Genesis 22. As a result of this obedience, God drew Abraham into a closer fellowship with him and called him God’s friend. Note that Abraham did not merely determine that God would be his friend. God initiated the action. God reached out to him and gave him the privilege of intimacy and closeness.

Verse 24 presents the conclusions about Abraham. Abraham had shown the reality of his faith by his willingness to offer Isaac in obedience to God’s command. We are made right in God’s sight through a faith which produces works. This does not claim that God justifies his people by our deeds. The Bible insists that saving faith must show itself by visible commitment to the Lord and compassion for others. Faith alone will bring salvation to anyone, but saving faith does not come alone. It is accompanied by works which show the genuineness of faith.

2:25. This section turns to the example of good works from the life of Rahab. Abraham was a man of prominent position and exemplary character. Rahab came from a background of degradation and insignificance. James insisted that these contrasting personalities showed deeds which demonstrated their righteousness.

2:26. In Genesis 2:7, God formed the first human being by breathing life into his body. The union of spirit and body produced a living human being. In death the spirit returns to God, and the body decays into dust. A body without the spirit is a corpse.

In the same way faith without works is also dead. A person claiming to have faith but lacking works is spiritually as lifeless as a corpse. An inactive faith, entombed in a creed affirmed by the intellect, has no more usefulness than a body with no heartbeat or breath. James did not intend to belittle correct doctrinal views, but he demanded practical holiness as an evidence of real faith.