

Faith or deeds?

James 2 v 14-26 – Leaders version

For a one hour study, just do the starred * questions

Check in – with the group sitting in a semi-circle go round and ask everyone, including leaders, how they are and how they're feeling about studying the Bible today.

What does the passage say and mean?

90 minutes

*1. **STICKERS** Do you think it's more important that you have faith in Jesus or that you live his way? Why?

Ask the group to put these on a flip-chart. Don't try to come to a conclusion, just read out their comments.

2. Read James 2 v 14. What issue are these Christians facing?

As we read letters in the NT, we can work out what issues particular groups were facing. James isn't writing the things that pop into his head, he's responding to issues that the churches are facing. This verse implies that there were some people who were claiming that faith was all they needed and that their behaviour need not be influenced by their faith. (Try not to get into the issue any further as we'll uncover the detail as we go through the study).

*3. Read Ephesians 2 v 8-9. What does St Paul tell us, in his letter to the Ephesian church, about faith and works?

That we are saved by grace, not by works. Just answer this as a comprehension exercise for now. (ἐργων, ergon – the same Gk word is translated 'deeds' in James and 'works' in Ephesians)

Questions 4-6 are **SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS**. You need to write them on flip-chart sheets for the group to work on in pairs.

4. **SDL** Read James 2 v 14-16. What good is it to do nothing about someone's physical needs?

None. Note: James is talking about needy brothers and sisters; he's specifically talking about needy Christians, to whom another Christian says 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed', but does nothing to help.

*5. **SDL** Read James 2 v 17. What does James mean?

James says that the kind of faith in Christ which is not lived out in our actions ('works' / 'deeds') is dead. Not just lazy, tired, busy or not quite up to it at the moment, but dead. As followers of Christ, our lives should reflect Jesus and this brings glory to Him.

Make sure the group understand that James is not saying that we work our way into heaven – he's saying that, having been saved by grace, our lives become more and more consistent with the gospel and this is a visible change. Allberry helpfully says, 'It is the behaviour of these people that shows what they really think, more than what they say. ... We do not always live what we say we believe – but we do always believe what we live out.' (2015, p73).

*6. **SDL** Read v18. Can Christians come to an arrangement, whereby some have faith and others have deeds? Why?

No! Because those who have only faith are not being changed by the gospel and we know that true faith saves and changes, Philippians 1 v 6. Such people may have an academic agreement with the gospel but no heart surrender and are not truly saved. Those who have only deeds have no faith in Christ to save them, they are just living Jesus' way in the hope that good behaviour will be enough. People in both the 'faith only' and 'deeds only' groups are following Christianity, but not following Christ. Those who have faith in Christ which is lived out in whatever circumstances they find themselves are following Christ in faith and deeds.

*7. Demons know that there is one God and this causes them to shudder. Why is this not saving faith?

They have not repented and believed, nor do they live as followers of Christ. They have 'faith' (they know that God is real and they know what he is like) but no deeds. For us to have faith without deeds is to be no better than the demons. If someone takes this as insult, they've almost understood the point!

*8. How do we know if our faith is alive i.e. real?

Let the group brainstorm. Then explain that our actions reveal whether our faith is real and James is going to give two examples of OT people whose faith was demonstrated in their actions.

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Be honest with yourself. Does your faith affect your behaviour, your words and your attitudes?

We've all got room for growth in the way that our faith is lived out, but the process of change will be active where faith is real.

*9. Read James 2 v 20-21 and Genesis 22 v 1-13. What does God tell Abraham to do in Genesis 22 v 2 and why is this so shocking?

God tells Abraham to take Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the mountain. This is shocking on several levels:

- *Child sacrifice is a horrific practice*
- *Some of the people who worshipped other gods in Canaan did sacrifice children. God has never required child sacrifice and we read of his judgement on those who practice it e.g. Jeremiah 19:15.*
- *Explain that this is the child that God has promised that his people will descend from – he can't die!*

Don't let the group get worked up about God asking Abraham to sacrifice his child – the episode is not about human sacrifice, it's about faith. Keep them engaged and keep the study moving!

*10. How did Abraham respond to this command from God in v3 and does this surprise you?

He obeyed! This should surprise us – we would expect him to pretend he hadn't heard, or to go but not take the child with him etc.

*11. Abraham says something to the servants that tells us how much faith he has in God. Can you see what it is? (Genesis 22 v 5)

We will come back to you. Abraham fully expects to bring Isaac back, although he doesn't know how this can be, in view of God's command. He is trusting God with Isaac's life, and trusting God to keep His covenant to create a nation from Isaac, although he has no idea what is going on.

*12. What happens in Genesis 22 v 6-13?

Abraham and Isaac reach the top of the mountain and Abraham ties up Isaac and puts him on the altar. Abraham raises the knife and, at the last minute, an angel stops him. Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket, which he sacrifices to God instead of his son.

13. Read James 2 v 22-24. In what way do Abraham's actions 'make his faith complete'?

Abraham's actions are the evidence that his faith is real – 'you see that his faith and his actions were working

together...' (v22). Remember, it's God, in whom Abraham has put his faith, who saves, not the actions. James tells us that we can see that a person is made righteous by the way they behave, and Abraham is an example of this, v24.

14. Read James 2 v 25, Joshua 2 v 1-21 and Joshua 6 v17. Rahab is a foreigner who has heard what God has done for his people. How do her actions demonstrate her faith?

She protects God's men who are in Jericho 'casing it' prior to a raid. Her faith in God leads her to act for him and not for her own city.

Explain that, although she was a foreigner, Rahab trusted God and was accepted into the Jewish community. Her descendants included King David and Jesus.

*15. Read James 2 v 26. James is saying that where there are no deeds to evidence faith, there are no signs of spiritual life – 'faith without deeds is dead'. Having studied this passage, how would you now answer Q1?

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Are there signs of life (deeds that evidence your faith) in you?

Take care that you don't cross the fine line into teaching that works save us – as you end the study make sure that everyone understands that we're talking about deeds being evidence of our faith, not the basis of our salvation. It may be that someone realises that their faith is, in fact, dead. This is an amazing opportunity to share the gospel with them again.

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Are there areas of your life in which your actions don't back up your faith? What needs to happen?

A helpful quote if anyone raises the subject of faith and works in Paul and James:

'Paul denies any efficacy to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works.' Moo p102

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