

Men to Men Ministry
Lesson Nine in the Letter of James
Belief and Deeds Part 1

Teacher: Just Larry

Phone: 916-337-2648

WEB: <http://theoinsight.com/just-james/>

Email: ljonson@hotmail.com

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChnVaqyrTKIZ9p7UljdvYOw>

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James 2:14-26 NASB

14 What use is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?

15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?

17 In the same way, faith also, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

18 But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

20 But are you willing to acknowledge, you foolish person, that faith without works is useless?

21 Was our father Abraham not justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called a friend of God.

24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

25 In the same way, was Rahab the prostitute not justified by works also when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

The shadowy question.

Do you have a fear of dead faith? I read threw this portion of James and there is something that stirs within me.

In James 2:17 I find these words, “faith also, if it has no works, is dead.”

In James 2:20 James seems to be shouting at my soul, “you foolish person, that faith without works is useless.”

And again in James 2:26 I start to doubt myself, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”

Don’t get me wrong here, I have faith. I believe, I know that God loves me, that God has forgiven my confessed sins, and God has empowered me to live a new life. But I still have this haunting fear. A fear that in the shadows of my life I lack the assurance of my life given to me by God. I question myself, is my belief, my faith, is dead. I listen to James and he just strengthens this shadow of the life I should have in Jesus.

James starts this portion with a simple question, “what good is it”. Do I live a life in fear of being enough? We look back at the scripture we have studied over the last weeks I find examples of my inadequacy.

I read through all the scriptures and I'm struck by my lack of Christian deeds in the face of my faith.

In chapter 1 verse 2 it's hard to think of the joy I am supposed to have in all my trials. In chapter 1 verse 6 that I'm supposed to ask for wisdom without any doubt to ask and belief but there are still doubts. In verse 14 of chapter 1 I seem to have something within me that draws me away from God. In verse 16 of chapter 1 it says I'm not to be deceived so I am Able to be deceived. In verse 19 of the same chapter it talks about getting angry and yes at times I am angry. In verse 26 it says my tongue can get in the way and often does. And in verse 26 also my faith is counted as worthless.

So why do I try James seems to pile on. Keeps picking at the sores in my life. It is that if I have a President trump scab that needs to be healed but never does. He says faith without deeds means none of those deeds I have done can ever save me from the terribleness of my life. Why, according to James, isn't faith enough? I read again in verse 17 it stands up and says no matter what all my faith, is all my belief, all my understanding, all of my devotion, all of my worship, all of my religion, is worth nothing? Is all my faith mean nothing if it's not applied? Is all my belief without an applied end, resulting in something that's called unprofitable?

James is pretty confrontational about faith and works, but it's not meant to be a source of fear. Rather, it's an encouragement to live out the transformative power of your faith. It's not about ticking off a list of deeds to prove you're "enough." It's about letting faith naturally flow into actions that reflect the love and grace you've received.

It's completely natural to have doubts and feel inadequate at times; that's a part of being human. Your faith journey isn't about perfection; it's about striving, learning, and growing. The fact that you're questioning and reflecting shows you're actively engaging with your faith, which in itself is a powerful testament to its vibrancy.

Faith isn't just about belief; it's about a relationship with God that inspires and motivates you to act. Even the smallest acts of kindness, honesty, and love can be profound expressions of your faith. So, it's not about the quantity of deeds but the quality and the heart behind them. Keep moving forward, one step at a time, and remember that grace covers all your imperfections. Your faith isn't dead; it's alive and seeking to grow.

Introduction

Lesson plan

Tonight, we'll look at all 13 verses. One would think two lessons for a whole chapter is really moving quickly for Larry. But just not to get your hopes up, this lesson is an overview on the entire end of the chapter but I'm afraid I have to break it into four sections.

1. First this overview Lesson #9 is of remainder of the second chapter.
2. Lesson 10 will be looking specifically at verses 14-17. **Profession and Practice**
3. Lesson 11 will be understanding James' ideas in 18,19. **Not "either or", but both and."**
4. Lesson 12 we will look at 20-26. **Proof of faith.**

This lesson is an effort to understand the whole before we look at its parts. We take this approach because there has been debates, controversies, misunderstandings, arguments, divisions, church splits, lectures, sermons, and even some just walking away from Jesus because of this portion of scripture.

The controversy

Most of the controversy is based on the assumption the Apostle Paul and James the brother of Jesus, simply disagree on a basic understanding of Jesus. It has become so heated at times it has killed relationships between brothers in Christ.

At issue is the means and methods of salvation. One side of the argument says "faith only" saves. I agree with that statement. Nevertheless, they would go further and say this act of faith, responded to by God, not only saves them but continually saves them. They are part of the family of God even if there are no changes in decisions, attitudes, or actions. This system of understanding is tied to the teachings of Paul. James and his insistence that faith without deeds is dead should be discounted as being simply wrong. Martin Luther said James was only good for starting the morning fire. One of the underlying thoughts about James is the assumption that what I do directly indicates a persons justification status.

The problem is in the Jewish philosophy to which James was teaching. James was in error because he was a Jewish Christian instead of a Christian Jew.

Paul wrote in Galatians 2:16, "**nevertheless, knowing that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law no flesh will be justified.**"

Some would say James and Paul's theology simply contradict each other. And these two opinions cannot be consolidated into one or the other and are mutually exclusive.

Therefore, in this first section, this overview of our portion of scripture, we have to understand this seeming theological adversity.

Definitions

There is a difference between belief and faith.

Belief what is it?

- **Definition:** Belief is the acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists.
- **Characteristics:** It is based on information. Acknowledges truth without necessarily leading to action. Does not automatically translate into behavior. Example: Believing that the Earth orbits the Sun based on scientific evidence.

Faith what is it?

- **Definition:** *Biblical understanding:* “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1).
Dictionary definition: Complete trust or confidence in someone or something.
- **Characteristics:** It involves confidence in God or a higher power. Leads to action; faith is seen through deeds. Examples in the Bible include Noah building an ark, Abraham obeying God’s call, and Joseph’s trust in God’s promises.
- **Key Point:** Faith goes beyond belief by influencing behavior and choices. In summary, belief is about accepting truth, while faith is about trusting God and acting on that trust. Faith is like a bridge that connects belief to action.

What is faith? Hebrews 11:1 sets out the definition: “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Faith is that which assures us that our hope is reality, even though we cannot yet see it. If we have faith, we are convinced that what we believe is real, true, and reliable. The biblical object of faith is the person and work of Jesus Christ. True faith has always been the identifying mark of the people of God.

What are works? Works are a person’s actions or deeds. Work is that which we perform for some kind of reward. We work at our jobs and expect to receive a paycheck for it. Even working on a voluntary basis has its own reward—praise from others, a feeling of good will, etc. In the context of salvation, works refers to good deeds we do, especially religious or charitable acts or the observance of the Old Testament law.

Is there a difference between deeds and acts and works?

1. **Deed** An action that is performed intentionally or consciously. A deed is a willful effort and not an automatic reaction to external circumstances.
2. **Acts** Take an action or do something. A generic account or historical retelling of something done. Acts are the things done and remembered.
3. **Works** Activity involving mental or physical effort done to achieve a purpose or result. Works are the result of an internalized want, need or desire which requires effort.

There seems to be difference between all three of these words, even they are often used interchangeably. The major difference is the inclusion of intent for deed, a context for an act, and the inclusion of motive in works. **All three are assumed to be a part of a willful, informed decision making process.**

In the faith vs. works debate, the two sides maintain that either we are saved by faith (and faith alone), or we are saved by works (or, more commonly, works added to faith). Which side is correct? What is the biblical relationship between faith and works?

Works are required for salvation—but Scripture is clear that those works are Christ’s, not ours. Jesus fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17). In fact, “the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross reconciled us to God (Romans 5:10), and as He died, Jesus proclaimed that the work was finished (John 19:30). Now we are invited to enter into God’s rest by faith: “Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works” (Hebrews 4:10).

Our works do nothing to earn salvation. It was the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ that justifies sinners (Romans 3:24). “Know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, . . . because by the works of the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16). We begin by faith, and we continue in faith: “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Galatians 3:2–3).

Works are the product of faith. Those who have true faith in Jesus Christ will be “eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14). John the Baptist called for “fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8). The book of **James** emphasizes the nature of true saving faith as that which results in good works: “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” and “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:17, 26). Grace through faith saves, and that faith is manifest in works. If someone claims to have faith yet exhibits no good works, his or her faith is “dead,” or nonexistent.

The faith vs. works debate, then, is really no debate at all. Both faith and works are integral parts of the Christian life. **Biblically, faith is the cause of salvation, while works are the evidence of it.**

Key understandings in James

There are three major understandings that we must comprehend to understand this supposed controversy between Faith/Belief and works.

James was not teaching a new thought or theology.

James was voicing his understanding of belief within the context of his Jewish heritage. It is remarkable that James is purported to be first of the written records of the New Testament. We will see it is the second letter he wrote which was distributed to the churches as we will see later in this lesson. There was little new theology. James wrote to the church as a part of the dispersed Jewish population throughout the Roman empire. Most of the recipients of this letter had some if not all the same religious upbringing as he and were taught by devout Jewish teachers. The readers for the most part had never actually seen Jesus. They had heard of great stories of miracles, conversions, changed lives, of the death and resurrection of Jesus. But with one exception, the church had the Jewish scriptures and widely distributed accounts of the first handers.

It is therefore very important to understand the writings of James in the light of what existing knowledge and learnings that existed in the audience to which James was writing.

Before Jesus, John the Baptist chimed in on the subject:

Matthew 3:8,9 Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance; and do not assume that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you that God is able, from these stones, to raise up children for Abraham.

Luke 3:10,11 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, “Then what are we to do?” And he would answer and say to them, “The one who has two tunics is to share with the one who has none; and the one who has food is to do likewise.”

The subject of works had been addressed by Jesus:

Matthew 3:8, Produce fruit in keeping with your repentance.

Matthew 7:15-21 “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.

We also have the account on the cross of the penitent man on the next cross. There was no opportunity for any work, deed or act prior to his death. And yet he was promised an eternal reward.

Paul’s writings on the subject.

Romans 2:5-8 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will repay each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, He will give eternal life; but to those who are self-serving and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, He will give wrath and indignation.

Romans 13:12 **The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let's rid ourselves of the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light**

Romans 14:12 **So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.**

I Corinthians 3:8 **Now the one who plants and the one who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.**

2 Corinthians 5:10 **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive compensation for his deeds done through the body, in accordance with what he has done, whether good or bad.**

Colossians 3:9-11 **Do not lie to one another, since you stripped off the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created it—a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free, but Christ is all, and in all.**

James before our study letter

And the greatest example outside of this letter of James was the action and verdicts in the first council of Jerusalem found in Acts 15 and resulted in a letter most likely penned by James and was distributed to churches visited by Paul.

Acts 15 I find this account, and I summarize:

There was controversy in the church centered in Antioch in the area of what we call Turkey or Lesser Asia. The issue was over circumcision. It seemed as the Jewish Christians were demanding the Jewish ceremonial requirement of all Gentiles joining in their fellowship had to be circumcised. There is a very hint in one ancient writing that they had made it into a public ritual to be witnessed by the church much like the church performs baptism. The formula was simple, "if you want to be saved you had to submit to the authority of the church and perform this ritual."

Paul and Barnabus were ministering in Derby also in the same area of Asia Minor. Paul was the founder of the church in Antioch and they wanted someone with credentials and their interests to be the spokesman to the headquarters of the General Church in Jerusalem. Som Paul and Barnabus listened to their concerns and headed south to Jerusalem to pose Antioch's question. They left by boat and took a roundabout route by stopping in Phoenicia and Samaria to gather any other good news that could be shared at the General Assembly. There was great conversions to be reported when they arrived.

Upon arrival the two missionaries were greeting with great honor and eagerness to hear of the great things in the North.

Then came the account and the big question. "Do you have to be circumcised to be saved?" Is there a deed to be done as a requirement prior to God forgiving and reconciling you to Him?

The response was immediate and quite excitedly responded to by the Party of the Pharisees. "Cut them". "It is a requirement of the Law."

This is where Peter speaks up. He told the council that Jesus had specifically told him to go to the Gentiles. Gentiles had been there at Pentecost, at the founding of the church. They had been anointed by God the Holy Spirit. There was no discrimination. They

had been purified by faith. Why now put on a yoke we did not require then? “NO” is my vote. We believe through grace for salvation in Christ Jesus.

The lines were drawn. The party of the Pharisees verses the party of Peter. Now if the church was led by Peter that would be the end of it.

But it was James the brother of Jesus that speaks up. He directly responds to the conversion accounts of the church in the North and of the spiritual wonders that were both encouraging and emotional. James was speaking with the authority of both being a witness of Jesus’ life and death, but now had taken the leadership role in Jerusalem First Church of the Nazarene.

It is James who says with a strong voice and leadership manner, “MY JUDGEMENT” is this. We are not to make it difficult for the Gentiles to come to the grace of Jesus. Trying to calm the lawyers in the Pharisee Party, James goes on there are a few admonitions to all the Gentiles who are saved by the Grace of God. Things to be avoided AFTER salvation was experienced: Abstain from bad food sacrificed to idols, refrain from sexual immorality, only eat meat that was properly killed and bled well. James looks over to a scribe and tells him to write all this down. It will be read in all the churches in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia and was to be delivered by Paul, Barnabas, Barsabbas, and Silas. This was most likely the first written words that could be included in the teaching and preaching in the new Christian Jewish Church.

Therefore, we can say with great certainty that the cutting deed was not, in the mind of James, a requirement before salvation, a ritual for salvation or a demonstration after salvation.

This second letter of James arrived 25 years after a letter that was quoted in the Book of Acts. This last letter was to overcome a great problem in the church over the requirements for the Gentile converts in the churches. And it seems as if the same problem was splitting the church. The acceptance of Jewish customs and rituals before a person was allowed by the church to be saved. The church had become the decision maker for every Gentile who would take a part in the grace of God.

The Problem Statement

Am I saved by some work, deed, or action that must be performed prior or during the salvation experience?

Am I saved by a willful, act, deed or work, or can I be saved without them?

For some there is a visceral and emotional response to these questions. Great theologies have been written stating flatly you are saved by Faith and Faith alone. That God never requires any deed, act or work to attain the freely given Grace of God. But this theology is subject to a false assumption. This assumption is that if you are saved only by faith you are also kept by faith. That if you have faith with no appreciable acts, works, or deeds you will continue in your state of grace. For that matter if you willfully sin they are automatically forgiven. Faith only. These holders of absolute perseverance would tell you their theology is based on Paul’s writings. Hence Martin Luther’s dislike for the book of James. Paul over James all the day long.

James was about action, and deeds. The issue in the church which was being addressed in this letter was a perversion and assumption of ever forgiving grace. If faith is enough then I don't need to do anything at all after my justification. Once saved always saved. James did not condemn Paul for this misconception, he was citing a perversion of Paul's words.

Heresy was slowly invading the church. Here was the start of Pelagianism which taught you are only saved through your deeds. Here was the start of Arianism which taught Jesus was not God and not able to forgive. Docetism that Jesus was only a spirit and his body was an illusion so He could not sin and was not tempted.

Two kinds of belief

In the account of the imprisonment of Paul and Silan in Acts 16, we find the response of the jailer who witnessed this jailbreak by the power of God. The jailer asks, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** And **“They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”** **And they spoke the word of God to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and was overjoyed, since he had become a believer in God together with his whole household.**

To understand belief and for that matter faith, one must understand there are two kinds: Intellectual and motivational.

Intellectual

In High School I learned Pythagorean theory. It is the basis for Trigonometry. It states that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the square of the other two sides. I even learned the 38 steps to prove this out in Geometry. I came to a acknowledgement of the theory as being true, believable and it works. But today in this class it makes no difference in my life. It is all head knowledge, it is an intellectual belief.

Motivational

I have two quarters in my pocket. I go to the store and I see a snack sized Snickers on the shelf priced as 45 cents. I know that neither of the two coins can buy the delicious treat, but I together they have the ability to pay for my guilty pleasure. I know it works that way. I believe it is the truth. I have done it in the past. It motivates me to put the two coins down with no expectation of denial. I believe in the worth of both the Snickers and the total of my two coins.

Argument of James

Belief or faith on the intellectual level, though well understood and without relevance of life was dead. Faith without works is dead. If there is no reliance, no action, no deed, no act to go along with faith and belief then it means nothing.

We may well believe in God but if there is no change because of that belief there is no change. James was saying belief must be proved. Faith must be proved. Proved to a point that you use it.

It is easy to turn the assumed Pauleen emphasis of faith, belief and grace to simply Gnosticism. A belief where it is all about knowledge and the idea of the world can be overcome by only spiritual understanding. A Gnostic could live life full of sin and willful disobedience to God, but as long as they believed it was good enough.

There is a difference between Paul and James

Paul and Jame were simply stating facts about the same object. But they were addressing in their writings about different perspectives of the same thing. Paul was looking at the long road that each believer had to take. These travelers were handicapped by their sin. They were unworthy to take on step on that golden road. Paul was saying this road that was set before each of us requires personal healing. Paul was saying to start the trip you need to have faith in God giving you the strength and healing take the next step. You need faith, belief, and grace.

James was viewing beyond the first step. James knew it would be tough. James knew it would be difficult. James knew it would take endurance. James knew there would be changes in each traveler's life. James knew each change started with a trial. And with each trial came a decision. A moral decision to have joy. A moral decision to persevere. A moral decision to do something about your path.

I would state without any chance of being corrected: **“No can be saved by works, but no one can be saved without producing works.**

The reconciliation of Paul and James is to understand that faith and works are the same thing. They are both part of a state of being. One is the internal part of that state of being and the other is the external part.

If your internals are in a state of faith, your actions are going to line up with that. If your actions do not align with an internal state of faith, then of course your internal state cannot be one which produces good deeds.

You can have a problem in either place. If you do good deeds but you aren't faithful, then you are effectively trying to buy your way into heaven and are thus fooling yourself. If you have strong faith but you never put in the action, then you are trying to get into heaven without changing yourself and are thus fooling yourself.

I firmly believe that we are saved by works. The works, the acts, the deeds of Jesus.