

February 4
Lesson 10 (NIV)

FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 143
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26

JAMES 2:14-26

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.



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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.

KEY VERSE

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.—James 2:17

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the relationship between faith and works.
2. Explain why obedience is a necessary component to a life of faith.
3. Identify an area where actions do not follow faith in his or her life and make a plan for change.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Flipping and Flopping
- B. Lesson Background

I. Useless Piety (JAMES 2:14-16)

- A. Severe Need (vv. 14, 15)
- B. Empty Sentiment (v. 16)

II. Empty Profession (JAMES 2:17-19)

- A. Evidence in the Actions (vv. 17, 18)
Basis of Faith
- B. Dread of Demons (v. 19)

III. Faithful Action (JAMES 2:20-26)

- A. Case Study 1: Abraham (vv. 20-24)
Result of Faith
- B. Case Study 2: Rahab (vv. 25, 26)

Conclusion

- A. Works of Law vs. Works of Faith
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Flipping and Flopping

When politicians change their positions on a topic, opponents are quick to deride the change as being a *flip-flop*. This derogatory label is not new, being traced back to the 1880s.

The issue at hand was U. S. President Grover Cleveland's compromise with the United Kingdom on fishing rights in the waters off Canada. This signaled a change in promised policy and outraged New England states that depended on the fishing industry.

A fallout of this political concession was a *New York Tribune* writer's calling of President Cleveland's action a "fisheries flip-flop." The phrase was probably a play on words in bringing to mind the way fish flip and flop on a boat deck. The phrase caught on, and since that time the flip-flopping charge has been made against countless leaders.

People know that talk is cheap and that actions speak louder than words. People are suspicious of those who say one thing today, but act in another way tomorrow. James has quite a bit to say about ensuring that professions of faith are matched by accompanying action consistently.

B. Lesson Background

The author identifies himself as James, "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). This clearly makes him a Christian leader, but which of the several men named James in the early church is he?

Two of the original 12 apostles of Jesus are named James. The James who was the brother of John was murdered by Herod quite early in the history of the church, too early for him to have been the author of our book (Matthew 10:2; Acts 12:1, 2). The other James, the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3), is a possibility, but his lack of mention in the New Testament aside from lists of the 12 apostles makes him unlikely as the author of the book under consideration.

Most likely is the James who was a son of Mary and Joseph, thus a half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). While this James did not believe in Jesus during his ministry (John 7:5), he did become a believer after Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:14). Paul records that Jesus made a special appearance to James after the resurrection, a person carefully distinguished from the 12 apostles in description (1 Corinthians 15:5-7). James was a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church in its early days (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19).

Based on the fact that the letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (James 1:1), the intended audience is Christians of Jewish background. If "scattered among the nations" refers to the scattering of Stephen's martyrdom, then the intended recipients are in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) as well as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch (11:19). If "scattered among the nations" is not linked to that persecution, then the intended recipients may live in the farther environs of the Roman Empire (John 7:35).

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus records that this James was martyred in the early AD 60s. Therefore we date the book to no later than AD 62. The combination of addressees, date, and content reflects the mid-first-century concerns of Jewish Christians who grappled with the place of the beloved Law of Moses in their lives. James, a Jewish Christian himself, was not afraid to teach that keeping the law is a good thing in certain circumstances (see James 2:8).

The tendency to try earning God's favor through keeping the law still held much appeal to Christians from a Jewish background. But Jesus, Paul, and others had shown that salvation could not be earned. Therefore, the place of obedience to God's commands was perplexing. Was there a place for good works that did not fall back into the Jewish system of keeping the old covenant law to please God? This is the issue that James addressed; it is an issue that resonates yet today.

HOW TO SAY IT

Alphaeus *Al-fee-us*.

Cyprus *Sigh-prus*.

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*.

Herod *Hair-ud*.

Jericho *Jair-ih-co.*

Judea *Joo-dee-uh.*

Phoenicia *Fuh-nish-uh.*

Rahab *Ray-hab.*

Sodom *Sod-um.*

Syrian Antioch *Sear-ee-un An-tih-ock.*

I. Useless Piety

(JAMES 2:14-16)

A. Severe Need (vv. 14, 15)

14. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

James's style is often to ask questions and then bring us to his answer. Here he asks the same question in two ways. Combined, the foundational question he poses is this: Is the person who claims to have faith but has no good works going to be saved from God's condemning judgment?

In the church today, the question might be asked this way: Is faith without works saving faith? This partially misses what James is asking, however, for an underlying question is this: Is faith without works faith at all?

15. Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.

Rather than answer immediately, James gives an example that highlights the question, and this is not merely hypothetical. It is a real-world example his readers face or have faced. Imagine someone in the congregation lacks clothing or food. What should you do? Note: the phrase *without clothes* does not necessarily mean without any clothing whatsoever. Rather, it can imply insufficient clothing to stay warm in cold weather.

B. Empty Sentiment (v. 16)

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?

Rather than offering physical help, clothing, and/or food, the person in James's scenario gives a blessing and tells the needy brothers and sisters to be on their way. The answer is, "God bless you and leave me alone." Does this do any good? Does a blessing of *peace* make the destitute person warmer or less hungry?

Such a response is in keeping with the theory that a person of faith does not need good works. The answer is obvious then. If people who claim to have faith fail to help a needy brother or sister, then something is wrong with their faith.

II. Empty Profession

(JAMES 2:17-19)

A. Evidence in the Actions (vv. 17, 18)

17. In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

This verse renders James's verdict on faith that lacks compassionate actions: it is *dead*. This is a strong statement, a condemning statement. It means there is no life, no validity to this claim to faith. Faith *alone*, divorced from actions, is hollow and empty. A lack of love for the needy is in conflict with a claim to love God, for God loves the poor and cares for those in need (see [Isaiah 3:14, 15](#)). This is not merely a Christian idea, but is taught in the Law of Moses (see [Deuteronomy 15:11](#)). Christians of Jewish background in James's day have a strong tradition of helping the unfortunate; ignoring the poor is offensive.

What Do You Think?

What questions could we ask ourselves that would reveal dead or dying faith in our lives?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- To expose lack of action
- To expose lack of compassion
- To expose wrong priorities
- To expose a wayward heart

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.

James shifts to the other end of the argument: the person who values good *deeds* over claims to *faith*. This person seems tired of those who tout their faith but have nothing to show for it. He might say, "You can talk about your faith all day, but if you have no works, you have nothing to show me. I'm not even going to talk about faith! Just look at my good works! Forget about faith."

James comes back at this second position with a refusal to separate the two. He starts with faith and then moves to works, saying his claim to faith is more than words. It is demonstrated by his actions. He has backed up his talking with a life of caring about the poor, a life of feeding and clothing those in need. Faith and works are not in conflict. They are partners.

BASIS OF FAITH

A friend received devastating news: she had an aggressive form of cancer. She left the doctor's office in shock but started treatment immediately on her physician's advice. She suffered through months of surgery, chemotherapy, and rehabilitation, all while holding to the hope that she would recover and live a

normal life. She believed her doctor when he told her that the best chance she had was to follow his instructions and receive the treatments. Even though she lost her hair and felt even worse from the medication, she followed the regimen faithfully.

When treatments ended, the doctor pronounced her free of cancer—and she was. She celebrated with friends and family. She trusted her doctor because of the evidence of his expertise, and that trust proved justified. Notice the sequence: evidence of expertise generated trust, which in turn resulted in the faith to follow the expert's counsel, even through the worst of the pain. Faith in God works similarly. God's track record of authority, power, expertise, etc., convinces us to trust him. That trust results in faith. Then we act according to that faith. Our behavior, the way we live, then becomes evidence of our faith—evidence for all to see.

—L. M. W.

What Do You Think?

How do we commit to doing good works as a visible example to others without slipping into legalism or pride?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When others praise us

When others criticize our motives

[Matthew 5:14-16](#) in relation to [6:1-4](#)

Other

B. Dread of Demons (v. 19)

19. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

James now moves to a topic at the heart of Jewish identity: the belief in *one God*. This is the foundation of what it means to be a Jew (see [Deuteronomy 6:4](#); [Isaiah 44:6](#)). The Romans and the Greeks of James's day believe in many gods and goddesses, but the Jews refuse to compromise in this area. The Christians follow this, also believing in a single God (see [Galatians 3:20](#)).

But mere recognition that there is only one God is not enough. James uses an extreme example in pointing out that *even the demons believe* this. Presumably these evil spirits have insights into the spiritual world beyond anything a human being can envision.

Demons are not fooled by those who imagine many gods. The demons know better, and in their perverted demonic hearts it causes them to *shudder*, for they know they are on the wrong side. And demonic recognition of or belief in one God does not mean they serve him. James knows for a fact that demons work in direct opposition to God and his plans. To bring it back to the earlier points, no demon cares about a person in need of clothing or food. They have no good works, only evil.

This is a word of caution for us today. Both Jews and Muslims believe in only one God. But that bare belief is not enough. In James's narrower context, one-God faith must be accompanied by godly actions, a demonstration of one's faith. In the wider context of the New Testament as a whole, faith in one God must include faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ, and in his saving sacrifice for human sins ([2 Timothy 3:15](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can an analysis of sin serve as a diagnostic tool of a person's relationship with God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding sins of commission

Regarding sins of omission

Regarding sin as a thermometer (reflects reality) vs. sin as a thermostat (changes reality)

III. Faithful Action

([JAMES 2:20-26](#))

A. Case Study 1: Abraham (vv. 20-24)

20. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

James has stated his case: claims of faith without the evidence of good deeds make for a dead, empty faith. Now he moves to prove his case by giving some examples that his Jewish-Christian readers will appreciate.

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

James's first example is that of the greatest of ancestors, namely *Abraham* and his willingness to obey the Lord's demand that he sacrifice *his son Isaac* ([Genesis 22:1-18](#)). This was a test of Abraham's faith, a test he passed because he feared the Lord and withheld nothing from him ([22:12](#)).

When we read that Abraham was *considered righteous for what he did*, we should not understand this as equivalent to and therefore in conflict to the idea that we are justified by faith. James is using being *considered righteous* in the sense of "proven true." Abraham's actions were motivated by his deep convictions. Abraham believed that if he killed his son, God could somehow bring him back from the dead and therefore fulfill the promise to make Abraham's descendants a great nation ([Hebrews 11:19](#)). Abraham's trust in God made it possible for him to obey God even in the most challenging of circumstances we can imagine.

RESULT OF FAITH

A Christian aid worker struck up a conversation with a Muslim refugee from Syria who was making his way to the relative safety of Turkey. As they got to know one another, the Muslim asked the Christian what made him want to work with refugees. This opened the door to speak of faith in Jesus and the importance of demonstrating the love of Christ by caring for those in need. The Muslim man replied that he had heard of Jesus and had even read parts of the Gospels about him.

“Maybe you can help me,” he continued. “For the past 90 nights, I’ve had the same dream. In my dream, a man wearing white clothes and bathed in light comes to me, and every night he tells me that he loves me. Who is this man?” The Christian took out his Bible and read a description of Jesus.

“That’s him!” the Muslim refugee exclaimed. “That’s the man in my dream!” The Christian then explained that Jesus was pursuing the man because He loved him. The man professed Christ that day.

There is good reason to wonder whether Jesus actually appeared to the man in dreams (see [2 Corinthians 11:14](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:21](#); [1 John 4:1-3](#); etc.). But rather than focus on a potential problem, the Christian seized an opportunity. Faith had led the Christian to that part of the world, and one result of that faith stood right before him: a new believer in Christ. As James stated, “You see . . . his faith was made complete by what he did.” Can the same connection be drawn between your own faith and deeds?

—L. M. W.

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.

Even before the testing of Abraham’s faith with the Isaac episode, God recognized that man’s great faith ([Genesis 15:6](#), a verse James quotes). Abraham’s relationship with God was based on his willingness to do things because of his trust in the Lord. He was willing to travel to a foreign land in obedience to God’s direction ([12:1-4](#)). He was willing to entrust his nephew into the Lord’s hands when God destroyed the city of Sodom ([18:16-33](#)). He was willing to try one more time with his elderly wife when the Lord told him she would become pregnant and he would finally have his long-awaited son ([21:1, 2](#)).

Abraham’s faith and obedience led to his remarkable designation as *God’s friend* (see [Isaiah 41:8](#)). Abraham is not referred to as “the obedient servant of God.” He is not “the one who did what God told him.” He is called the friend of God! Faith is descriptive of a relationship with God, not a transaction.

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances, if any, could someone today be seen as “God’s friend”?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering the connection between the terms friend and righteousness

Considering the biblical rarity of that designation ([2 Chronicles 20:7](#); [Isaiah 41:8](#))

Considering the opposite in [James 4:4](#); etc.

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

James is not implying that only works are required to be *considered righteous*. To do so would be a victory for those Jews who promote keeping the law as the pathway to salvation. James never minimizes or discounts the importance of faith. Therefore, we need to take this verse in concert with what James has already said and not in isolation. His overall point is that true faith will cause correct behavior. Good works are not the condition of saving fellowship with God, they are the result. Good works demonstrate true faith, and it is by this necessary combination that we are made *righteous*.

B. Case Study 2: Rahab (vv. 25, 26)

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?

James’s second historical example is more obscure. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho, and she assisted the men whom Joshua dispatched to evaluate the city. She hid the spies and thus saved their lives as well as the lives of her family (see [Joshua 6:23-25](#)). This was an act of faith, for she believed that Israel and its God were stronger than Jericho and its pagan gods and walls ([Joshua 2:11](#)). Rahab is mentioned by the author of Hebrews as one who acted in faith ([Hebrews 11:31](#)). She also is in the genealogy of Jesus ([Matthew 1:5](#)).

In some ways, the example of Rahab is more to the point of James’s concerns than Abraham’s. Rahab’s actions in safeguarding the spies includes giving them lodging ([Joshua 2:1](#)) and, doubtlessly, food. She was the one who saw others in need and offered assistance, a perfect example of faith demonstrated by deeds of concern for the well-being of those in need (compare [James 2:15, 16](#)).

26. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

James’s final example is an analogy. A *body without the spirit* is the most basic understanding of death. The people of James’s day believe that a person’s last breath releases the spirit and therefore is the dividing line between life and death. To “breath your last breath” means you have died (compare [Job 34:14](#); see [Luke 23:46](#)). When one’s spirit departs, all that is left is lifeless, decomposing flesh.

James’s point, then, is that works enliven faith. Deeds of compassion and obedience to God turn words of allegiance into actions of commitment. Others will judge our faithfulness by our lives, but we may do this too. Do we really believe what we say? Let us look at our own lives to find the answer. Reading James demands self-evaluation.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to resist becoming weary ([Galatians 6:9](#)) in helping others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In advance, before weariness sets in

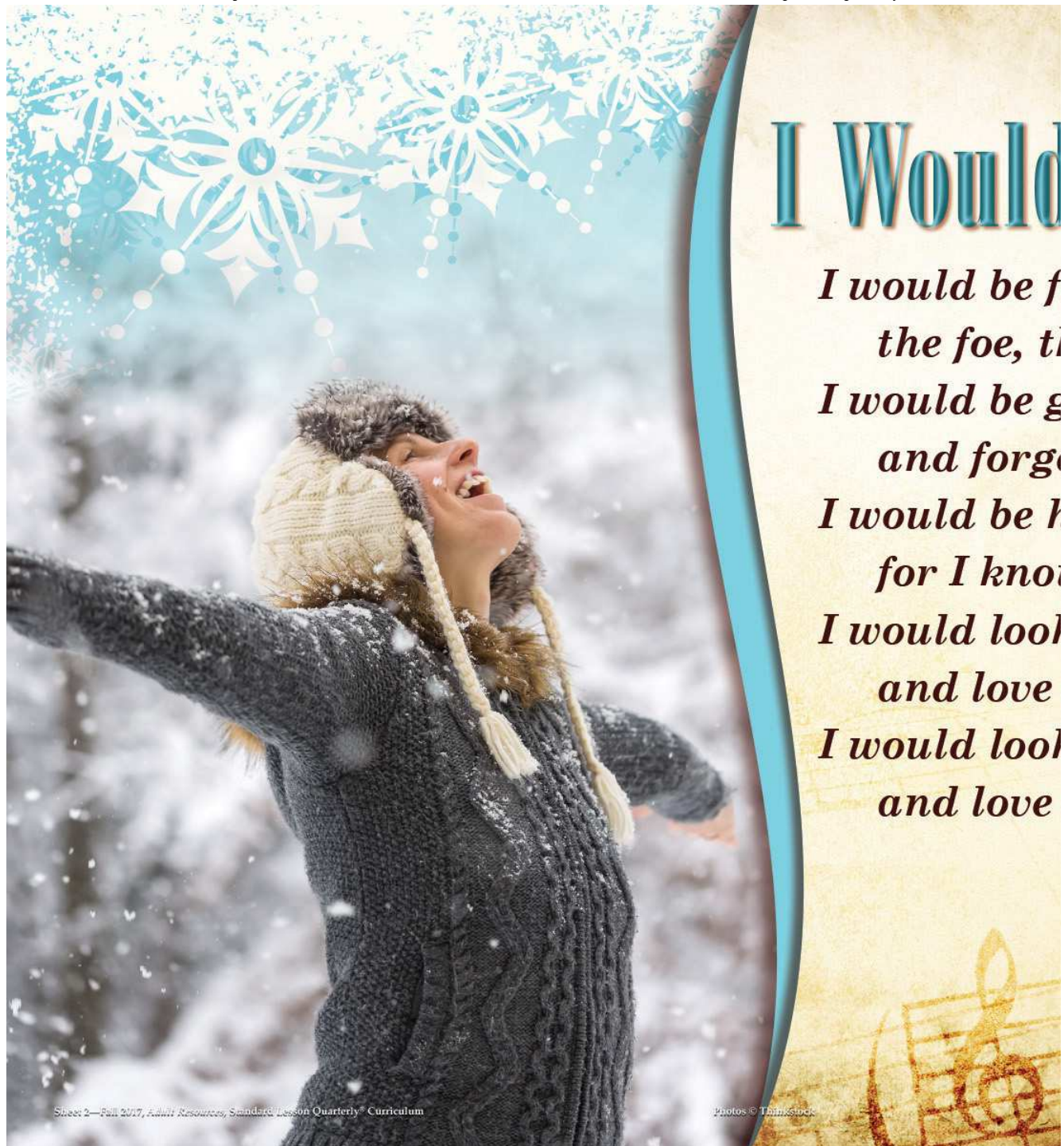
Recognizing “compassion fatigue” as it begins to take hold

Conclusion

A. Works of Law vs. Works of Faith

Much unfortunate confusion has surrounded the alleged conflict between Paul’s denunciation of the value of works and James’s insistence on the essential role of works in the life of the Christian. As James sees it, it is never a matter of either faith or works, but faith that results in works. James attacks the common self-deception that *what you do* can be separated from *what you believe*.

Careful study shows that Paul and James are not in conflict, but are talking about works in different frames of reference. Paul's battle is against those who believe keeping the Jewish law is the ticket to salvation (see [Romans 3:28](#); [Galatians 2:16](#)). He, an expert in the law, rails against dependence on keeping the law ("works of the law") without the step of faith in Jesus Christ. Paul's contention is that this is futile, for no one can ever keep the law perfectly and earn salvation.



I Would

*I would be f
the foe, ti
I would be g
and forgo
I would be h
for I know
I would look
and love
I would look
and love*

Sheet 2—Fall 2017, Adult Resources, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 10. Start a discussion by asking "How can we make this a reality?" as you work through the stanza line by line.

James, on the other hand, is fighting for the proper place of works in the life of the believer. Claims of faith need to be proven by the evidence of one's life. Compassionate actions should be evident after we come to faith in Christ.

Even so, works of the law and works of faith can look remarkably similar, so it might be helpful to visualize the difference. If we understand faith in Christ as the doorway to salvation, then we see the value of works in the contexts of both Paul and James. Before we walk through the doorway of faith in Christ, works will not save (Paul's argument); after we walk through the doorway of faith in Christ, then works are the evidence of commitment to God and his ways (James's argument). The difference is in the purpose: we can never be saved by good works, but we cannot be saved without them.

B. Prayer

Father, we truly believe you are the one and only God. May this belief be much more than words. You proved faithful by your actions; may we do so as well. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Faith's fitness requires exercise.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class, give each of four volunteers a penny. Tell them that in this activity, they will be asked for their penny. Tell one to respond, "You can have my penny." All others are to respond, "I hope you find a penny."

To begin class have the volunteers sit at the front of the classroom with open palms displaying the pennies. Choose one volunteer from the rest of the class to say "I need a penny" to each penny-holder. Each should respond as you previously instructed.

After the demonstration, point out that while each volunteer seemed to be offering their penny by holding it in an open palm, not everyone's words matched that action!

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Worthy of Trust?" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow learners a few minutes to work in pairs on the activity.

Transition to Bible study by saying, "People know that talk is cheap and that actions speak louder than words. People are suspicious of those whose walk does not match their talk! James agrees, saying that our professions of faith must be matched by accompanying action."

Into the Word

Divide the board into two columns, one designated *Faith Without Deeds* (*James 2:14-20, 26*) and the other *Faith That Results in Deeds* (*James 2:21-25*). Read together the lesson text to look for who James says displays the kind of faith in either column and what that type of faith looks like. As responses are given, list them under the appropriate column heading on the board. Below are probable responses.

Faith Without Deeds: benefits no one (v. 14) / doesn't help with physical needs (vv. 15, 16) / is dead (v. 17) / is no better than the faith of demons (v. 19) / is like a corpse (v. 26).

Faith That Results in Deeds: reflects Abraham's obedient faith (v. 21) / is a complete faith (v. 22) / shows friendship with God (v. 23) / is the kind of faith by which God declares us righteous (v. 24) / is like Rahab's countercultural faith (v. 25).

Dig deeper by saying, "We know that a faith without works is a dead faith, but what about works without faith?" Guide the conversation toward the fact that works alone don't have the power to save us. Draw on the points made in the commentary's Conclusion as necessary.

Say, "James isn't telling us that we must rely on our works to be right with God. Rather, he's explaining that a healthy faith will produce visible signs of itself. A living faith produces works; and when we trust God enough to perform works, we grow and nurture our faith in the process."

Into Life

Write vertically on the board the word *FAITH*. After saying, "A healthy faith produces visible signs in the form of works," divide learners into four groups and have each create an acrostic that uses the letters in the word *FAITH* to list some of the visible signs of faith.

Possible responses include but are not limited to: F—fearlessness, financial generosity, fellowship; A—aid, assisting those in need; I—instigating change, inspiring the weary, interceding in prayer; T—trusting God with your money and time, thankfulness; H—helping, having a generous spirit.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Living Faith" activity from the reproducible page. Have the class spend a few minutes completing the activity in pairs. Invite volunteers to share responses with the class.

As learners depart, say, "To have a living, healthy faith, we must use our actions in addition to our words. Let's commit to demonstrating our faith throughout the week!"