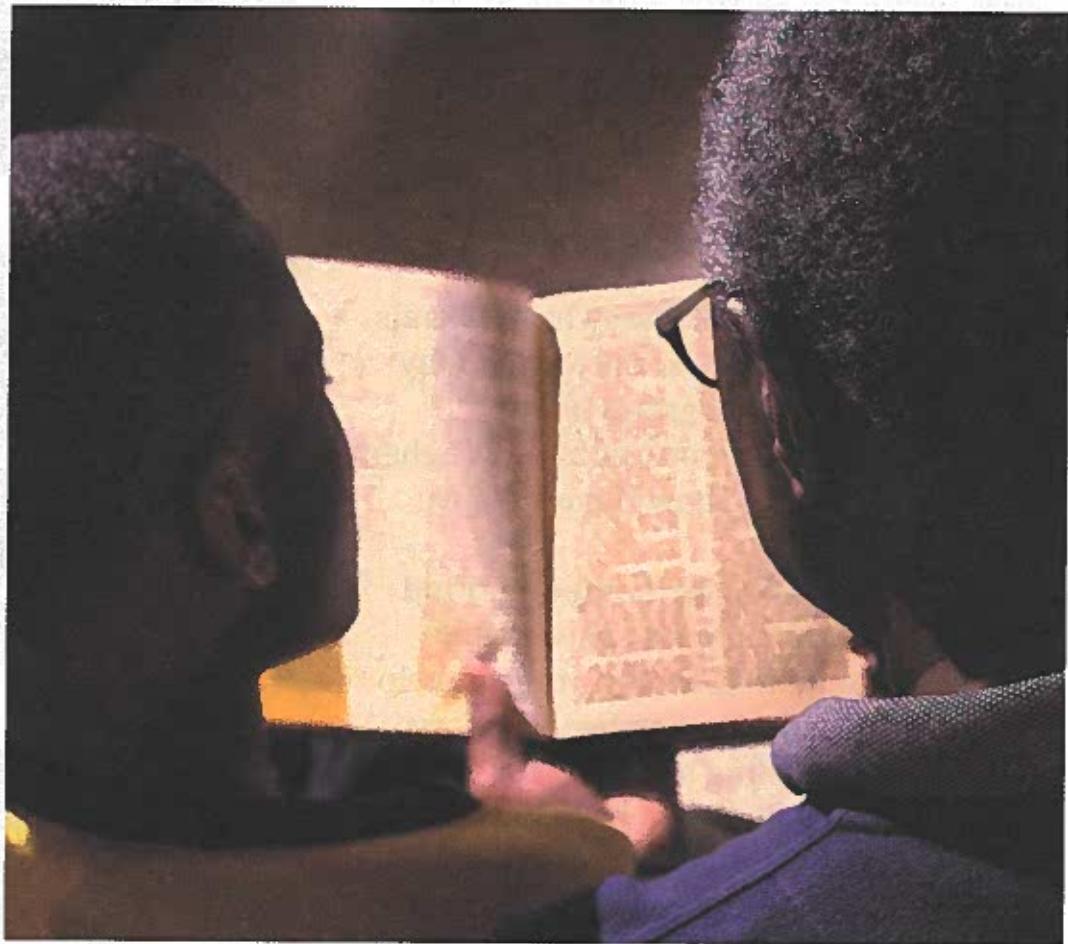


SESSION 3

Faith on Display in Your Actions



QUESTION 1:

*Who's someone you appreciate for
practicing what they preach?*

THE POINT

What you believe is seen in what you do.

THE PASSAGE

James 2:14-26

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Belief in God is strong among Americans. One survey found that:

- ▶ Fifty-three percent know God exists and they have no doubts.
- ▶ Eighteen percent believe in God but harbor some doubts.
- ▶ Four percent believe in God sometimes.

Another poll found that more than sixty-eight percent of Americans identify as Christian.¹ You would think that, with such a large majority professing belief in God and nearly as many claiming faith in Christ, the ethical and moral standards of Americans would be higher. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Some want to blame our ethics and morality problem on the opposing political party, social media, or television, but the responsibility rests on us as individuals. If sixty-eight percent of us claim to be Christian, where are our ethics and morality?

The problem is not with what people *believe*; the problem is that too many of us do not *live* what we claim to believe. We display a large disconnect between our belief system and our conduct. What we do does not match what we say we believe. In the book of James, we are pointed to a better way.

James 2:14-17

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him?

15 If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food

16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it?

17 In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.

As he did with the verses we examined in the last session (Jas. 2:1-13), James used the socioeconomic diversity of his time to make his point about the importance of active faith. He gave the example of a desperately poor “brother or sister” who has nothing to wear or eat. If the only thing another believer offered was platitudes, he offered nothing at all. Here was a person needing substantive help, but all he received were the words, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed.” To be sure, encouraging words are important in the life of the church (Heb. 10:25), but words alone will not feed a person and keep him warm. He needs food and clothing!

Perhaps you have stood in a walk-in closet full of clothes and lamented, “I have nothing to wear.” What that usually means in our modern culture is, “I can’t find anything that’s appropriate for the occasion, or in the right color, or that I feel like wearing.” When James described this fellow Christian as “without clothes,” he wasn’t implying that he was without *nice* clothes or without the *appropriate* clothes. He was without clothes—*period!* This fellow believer was either completely naked or only wearing an undergarment. He was in a dire, desperate situation.

Not only was this person naked, but he was also hungry. Again, in James’s example the hungry person was not merely without good food, healthy food, tasty food, or even food that he favored at that moment. The fellow believer had absolutely nothing to eat.

James was writing to Jewish believers (Jas. 1:1-2) who came from a strong tradition of hospitality in their culture. The Jewish people were instructed to never turn away a stranger in need (Lev. 19:34), much less a brother or sister. By social norms, they were expected to help. Yet, in James's example, no help was offered—only pious and useless words. Yet these words were not merely useless, but they were also demeaning and humiliating.

James connected this to faith. "In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself."

QUESTION 2:

What are the characteristics of faith that is alive?

People must see our faith in what we do; otherwise, our belief—our faith—is dead. Death—what a vivid image! The death imagery evokes a full range of sensorial responses. Lifeless and useless. Furthermore, an unmistakable stench surrounds death. Inactive faith has the smell of death around it.

Inactive faith does not merely fail to do good; it makes the situation worse. In James's example, the poor brother or sister would leave the church meeting as he did when he entered, still without clothes and lacking food. Instead of the warmth he needed, he felt the cold wind of apathy. As he left, the only thing he was filled with was the strong impression that those he considered his brothers and sisters were devoid of love and devoid of faith. "If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him?" (1 John 3:17).

QUESTION 3:

How does this passage serve as a warning to believers?

James 2:18-20

18 But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works.

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

20 Senseless person! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless?

As believers, we have beliefs, truths, and doctrines that are important to us. But if you want to know what beliefs are truly valuable to a person, consider how those beliefs impact or are seen in how he lives. It is difficult to give credibility to what someone believes if his actions contradict his words. Real evidence is seen in what we do, not simply in what we say.

1. When a pro-life member of Congress found out his mistress might be pregnant, he asked her to consider abortion. When the news broke, he resigned his office.² His actions revealed that he is not pro-life. Pro-life people do not merely make pro-life statements, they take pro-life actions.
2. A Stockholm resident complained to police about the speeding cars driving through his neighborhood. The police took his complaint seriously. The next day they set up a traffic control operation in his neighborhood. Among the people they ticketed for speeding was the very man who filed the complaint.³ The man could say publicly he was opposed to speeding, but his actions said otherwise.
3. The Greater Yellowstone Coalition seeks to protect the lands and wildlife of that area. One would expect the director of such a group to be the greatest advocate for the wildlife, but a former director in Idaho Falls had to resign and pled guilty to the misdemeanor charges of taking game unlawfully and the

wasteful destruction of wildlife.⁴ A belief in the importance of conservation efforts must be accompanied by practicing sound conservation policies.

Even the world sees that there must be a connection between what we believe and what we do. People must see that connection especially in matters of faith. We can have no greater possession than a relationship with Christ by faith, and that faith relationship should be abundantly obvious in how we live. Genuine faith and true works are inseparable. Our works—how we live—are the demonstration of our faith.

Like most Americans in our day, those in James's original audience believed in God. James did not correct their theology; in fact, he praised them for believing in God. For these Jewish believers, believing in the one true God was essential (Ex. 20:3); it was the cornerstone doctrine of their faith and heritage (Deut. 6:4). Just thinking correctly about God, however, is not sufficient. James stressed that “even the demons believe—and they shudder” at the thought, but their belief has not changed them at all. They are still demons—their belief does not save them—and they are fully aware that they will face certain destruction (Matt 8:29).

Genuine faith may begin with good theology, but it will never end there. Some people's faith consists of agreeing to a set of beliefs, or worse yet, simply saying they agree to certain beliefs. That is radically different from having a vital, life-changing relationship with God. It is one thing to talk about God and another thing entirely to obey God by putting that faith into practice.

QUESTION 4:

How is faith more than what we say we believe?

James 2:21-26

21 Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar?
22 You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete,
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 justified by works and not by faith alone.
25 In the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute also justified by works in receiving the messengers and sending them out by a different route?
26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

At first glance, James's question—"Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar?"—seems to contradict Paul's teaching that salvation comes from faith and not from works. "A person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Rom. 3:28; see also Eph. 2:8-9).

- ▶ Paul wrote: "But to the one who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited for righteousness" (Rom. 4:5).
- ▶ James wrote: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24).

By faith, Abraham had waited for years for his son Isaac (Gen. 21:1-5). Nonetheless, when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering, Abraham obeyed without delay (22:1-3). Abraham had faith in God and fully trusted Him; therefore, he could do what God told him to do, even if it did not make any sense to him. The inspired writer of Hebrews said this about Abraham's faith and actions:

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. He received the promises and yet he was offering his one and only son, the one to whom it had been said, Your offspring will be traced through Isaac. He considered God to be able even to raise someone from the dead; therefore, he received him back, figuratively speaking” (Heb. 11:17-19).

Abraham’s faith led to his obedience. He was willing to do the unthinkable because of his faith and trust in God, the One who was more than able to raise Isaac from the dead. How do we know Abraham believed this? His faith enabled his actions, and his actions proved his faith.

It makes perfect sense that James would appeal to Abraham, who the Jewish believers considered to be the father of their faith. However, his argument takes an interesting twist when he illustrates this concept by mentioning the faith of a Gentile prostitute.

Initially, Rahab was outside the covenant community, but she had saving faith. By faith, she protected the spies (Josh. 2:1-6,15-16), and because she acted out of her faith, God spared her life and the lives of all in her house when Jericho fell (vv. 17-20; 6:17,22-23). Rahab believed what she heard about the God of the Israelites and chose to trust their God and acknowledge Him as her God too (2:8-11).

Rahab did not merely say she believed; she put her belief into action, risking her life to save God’s soldiers that came to her home in response to her words of faith. Her faith led to action, and because she acted in faith, her life and the lives of all in her house were saved. The writer of Hebrews included her in the “hall of the faithful” right alongside Abraham (Heb. 11:30-31).

There is no disconnect between James’s and Paul’s teachings. Paul wrote that salvation comes because of God’s grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9), but he also wrote that the purpose of our salvation is to do the good works that God has planned for us (v. 10). Good works are the natural result of real faith. To Paul, godly works will always accompany saving faith.

James was not teaching that faith and works are opposing forces, or that works apart from faith can save. Faith and works are complementary concepts. Faith activates our works, and those works complete our faith. “Faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete.” Works are not what we do *for* salvation, it is what we do *because of* salvation.

Paul was criticizing legalism, a faithless religious life full of actions but nothing else. James was criticizing creedalism, a workless faith. Legalism and creedalism are both wrong and inadequate. Life demands more than words; it requires action. A faith that boils in your soul and propels you into action not only saves you but enables you to be a part of God’s redemptive mission.

QUESTION 5:

How has your faith impacted your decisions or actions recently?

ENGAGE

What are two ways your faith needs to be better reflected in your daily life?

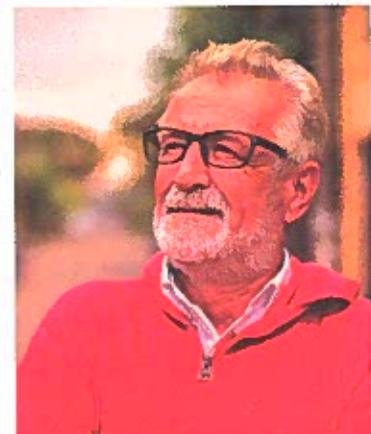
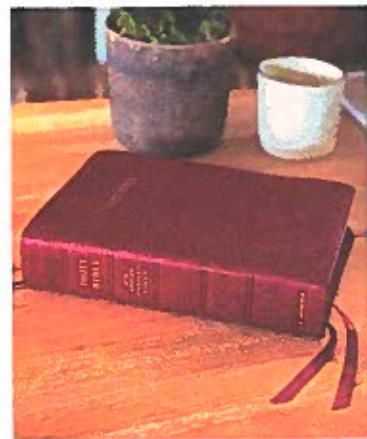
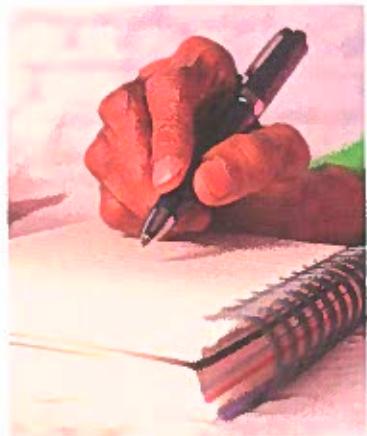
1.

2.

LIVE IT OUT

How does your life bear out the truth that what you believe is seen in what you do?

- ▶ **Read and pray.** Read Psalm 139:23-24: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way.” Pray, asking God to expose areas in your life where you are not living what you claim to believe. After praying, develop a plan for life change to help align your actions with your faith.
- ▶ **Write and reflect.** Create a “faith-in-action journal” in which you list at least five of your core beliefs. Over the next week, write ways your actions show (or do not show) that you are applying those beliefs in your life.
- ▶ **Ask and listen.** Ask a trusted friend to speak into your life and tell you how consistent you are at living your faith. Listen. Avoid getting defensive. Prepare to make some life changes based on what you hear.



END NOTES

1. <https://lifewayresearch.com/fast-facts/>.
2. Rachel Bade and Jake Sherman, “Tim Murphy resigns from Congress,” *Politico*, October 5, 2017, politico.com/story/2017/10/05/tim-murphy-resigns-from-congress-243510.
3. “Speed Trap Nabs Driver Who Suggested It,” *NPR*, April 6, 2012, npr.org/2012/04/06/150115644/speed-trap-nabs-driver-who-suggested-it.
4. Jimmy Hancock, “Advocate guilty of poaching: Greater Yellowstone Coalition’s Marv Hoyt admits he illegally killed elk,” *ISJ*, December 17, 2013, idahostatejournal.com/members/advocate-guilty-of-poaching-greater-yellowstone-coalition-s-marv-hoyt/article_77cccd4b4-67ae-11e3-9e33-001a4bcf887a.html.