

James 2:20-26
August 11, 2024



INTRODUCTION

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

Bring a few objects to illustrate the difficulty in knowing something is real or fake (a \$100 bill, a painting, a baseball signed by a famous player). Discuss each, one at a time. Show the \$100 bill and ask students to discuss whether it's real or counterfeit. Show the painting and tell them you think it's a Picasso or Monet or Rembrandt and ask, "Can we know for sure?" Show the baseball and ask how they'd decide if it's legitimate.

No one wants something they think is real to turn out to be fake. If you received a \$100 bill and went to buy new shoes only to be turned away at the cash register, you'd be upset! The same thing would be true about a painting or a baseball you thought was signed by someone famous. The thing is, it's not just material items that sometimes turn out to be fake. There is such a thing as fake or counterfeit faith, and it's actually worse than anything else that turns out to be fake. In today's passage, James explained how to identify genuine faith in yourself or someone else.

DISCUSSION

 HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:20-26.

Are "works" expressed in a negative or a positive sense here? Explain.

Can works be both negative and positive? Compare Romans 3:28 to James 2:20-26 for help.

Which temptation do you face most often—trying to be good enough for God or thinking that God's forgiveness means you can live however you want? Explain.

What was James's point in using Abraham and Isaac as an example? Does verse 21 mean Abraham was not righteous before he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

What about Rahab? Why did James mention her?

Is it weird to you that James went from calling his readers, “brothers and sisters,” in verses 5 and 14 to saying, “Senseless person,” in verse 20? Why do you think he did this?

How can you and I be right before God? Faith or works? Explain.

GOING DEEPER

Glance back over verses 14-19, which we studied last week. Now, in your own words, summarize James 2:14-26.

How would you answer someone who argues that James and Paul (Romans 3:28) express two different views of what it means to be saved?

APPLICATION

How would you describe your faith? Is it living and active or fake and dead? What needs to change?

How would the world be different if every Christian lived every day with real faith?

How would your life be different? How would student ministry here at FBC Summit be different?

PRAYER

Thank God that because of Jesus you don't have to be good enough for Him to love and accept you. Ask Him to show you how faith needs to work in your life in ways that show up as real.

LOOKING AHEAD

Encourage your group to look ahead to next week's scripture passage:

August 18, 2024 --- James 3:1-12

COMMENTARY

James 2:20-26

2:20. 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. Foolish also appears in Mark 12:3, translated “empty-handed.” The objector was spiritually foolish or willfully ignorant. Have you ever dealt with professing Christians who felt they could keep their faith to themselves and did not need to demonstrate it? True faith shows itself invisible deeds, not merely by agreeing with a creed.

2.:21-26. The examples of Abraham and Rahab stand in 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.

2:21-23. 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.

Abraham showed his righteousness by his willingness to offer Isaac on the altar. Paul uses the same Greek word in Romans 3:28; 4:2, 5; and 5:1 (“justified”) to describe the righteousness God credits to a believer through faith in Jesus Christ. James uses the word to describe the righteousness we show to others as we obey Jesus. The saving faith of Abraham showed itself by his total obedience to God in the matter of offering up Isaac. The faith James commended moves the heart and controls the life.

Abraham’s 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. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac vividly demonstrated the existence of true faith.

Abraham’s willingness to offer Isaac fulfilled the promise of Genesis 15:6 and 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. God reached out to him and gave him the privilege of intimacy and closeness.

2:24-26. 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.

James's declaration that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone may seem to contradict Rm 3:28, but note that Paul was writing about "works of the law," meaning the Mosaic law, whereas James spoke only of "works," which has in view good deeds. James's references to law are to "the law of freedom" (the gospel; see 2:12) and to "the royal law" (v. 8; Lv 19:18), both of which affirm his assertion that true faith is expressed through good work.