

Your Faith: True or False?

This is the question James addresses through much of his epistle. In the passage we are studying this week James outlines the foundational concepts that expose the differences between a professed faith and a genuine transforming faith—and he does so with stark clarity.

James 2:14-26 is undoubtedly the most difficult portion of this epistle to interpret, with deep theological truths concerning the important relationship between faith and works. Our challenge will be to un-wrap this section as James makes every effort to make his points clear.

Prepare Your Heart: Father, I long for my life to be characterized by the marks of a living faith. Enable me to follow through to bring my actions more in line with my beliefs.

1. Define the foundational *belief* of saving faith.

One of James' most admirable qualities is his skillfulness in asking probing questions that take us directly to the heart of the matter. Our section begins with a set of arresting questions that deserve our utmost attention.

2. a. **Read** James 2:14 several times. What does James imply by his questions?

The word "says" (NASB) or "claims" (NIV) is one of the keys to interpreting this passage.

- b. **Read** James 2:14-26 and explain the meaning and significance of the word "says" or "claims" as used in this context.

- c. To further understand James' point, read and comment on 1 John 1:6; 2:4 and 2:5-6.

Once James states his theme in 2:14 he illustrates it in four ways, using provocative language that has the ability to shake us from our lethargy. *As we consider each illustration, ask God to give you His insight into the important relationship between faith and works.*

• **Illustration #1: James 2:15-17**

3. **Review** verses 15-16. Note the reoccurrence of the key word from verse 14. Restate the example James challenges us with in your own words, making personal application to your life.

4. What opportunities do you have to express your faith by caring for the poor? What will you do with these opportunities in the coming weeks?

5. James heightens the matter in verse 17 to a much more serious and solemn level. Explain verse 17 in a way that a child could understand it.

• **Illustration #2: James 2:18-19**

As this section begins James anticipates an objection to his message in 2:15-17. He envisions a scenario in which someone tries to separate faith and works, by saying “You have faith, and I have works.” Thoughtfully **reread** and consider James 2:18.

6. Explain why it is not possible to have only one or the other ... works without faith or faith without works.

James continues to press his point in verse 19 with a forceful example. Spend several minutes contemplating what is being said. Remember James is writing to Jewish Christians.

7. In what ways do demons perfectly illustrate the poverty of verbal profession by itself?

The question that James addressed in his church remains a real issue today. Many of us know people who understand how Jesus' life, death and resurrection provided a remedy for their sin. They go to church from time to time. They like to read and talk about spiritual things. They seem to live decent lives, though they may indulge in a vice or two. Yet there is nothing *distinctively* Christian about their behavior. There is no real self-sacrifice, no costly obedience; no good deed that goes against their grain, nothing that challenges their well-designed life.

Pause and Reflect: Realizing that faith without action is dead; examine *your* faith and life before God. Does your verbal faith come to life in acts of obedience to God's Word?

8. What evidence is there in your life that confirms the reality of what you profess?

• **Illustration #3: James 2:20-24**

James continues his discussion by giving us Scriptural proof of how *real faith* expresses itself in acts of love. He chooses familiar Old Testament events to prove this part of his argument. **Reread** James 2:20-24 and Genesis 22:1-14 for background.

9. In what ways does Abraham's obedient action challenge your life of faith?

10. What points are made about the relationship of faith and works from this illustration?

11. James 2:24 says, "A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." How can this statement be reconciled with Paul's teaching that we are justified by faith and not by works (Romans 4:4-5; Ephesians 2:8-9)?

Note: In your answer to question 11, consider the different ways that Paul and James may be using the words "faith" and "justification."

