



Dear Students,

Some people think of themselves as "spiritual but not religious". They believe that as long as you are a good person who does good deeds, you don't need to know Jesus. If they try sincerely to be kind and do what's right, are those people "saved"?

Some religious church-going people mainly focus on reading the Bible and prayer and their personal relationship with God. They try sincerely to strengthen their faith, and to have a pure heart, but they aren't that involved in the world around them. Is that a good Christian life?

Who is closer to God? What's the best way to live?

The earliest Christians asked those questions too! People knew that Jesus had saved them by his death and resurrection, but they were still figuring out how to talk about it.

One natural way to think about religion is to ask "What does God want, and how can I give it to him?" Traditional beliefs like Shintoism, African and Native American religions, even Greek and Roman or Norse mythology all work that way. How do I get the gods to help me? (And how do I pacify evil spirits so they leave me alone?)

The Christian message was new and totally different: We can't give God what he wants, so God gives it to us instead! Jesus's name means "God saves us". Faith in Jesus is believing I can't save myself by being good enough or doing enough good things.

When the first Christians talked about "being good enough" or "doing things God wants" they summed this up by calling it "works" or we might say "actions".

James is worried that if we know we aren't saved by our own actions, people will use faith as an excuse to not do anything ever! So first he kind of makes fun of that idea by showing that just "thinking" good things isn't very helpful:

James 2:14-17

14 My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? **15** Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. **16** What good is there in your saying to them, "God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!"—if you don't give them the necessities of life? **17** So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.

James goes on to ask if it even makes sense to have "faith" without "actions":

James 2:18-19

18 But someone will say, "One person has faith, another has actions." My answer is, "Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions." **19** Do you believe that there is only one God? Good! The demons also believe—and tremble with fear. **20** You fool! Do you want to be shown that faith without actions is useless?

It's easy to think that "faith" is just something inside your head, but James is saying here that it's not. Thinking something is true is different from aiming your life towards it.

When James was alive, the example of faith everyone used to argue about "faith" and "works" was Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish people and religion. Abraham was an old man who was trying to live the right way. God spoke to Abraham and told him to leave his country and go to a new one far away. Abraham gathered his wife and his nephew and his sheep and he just went, sight unseen, trusting in God. James reminds us of that story:

James 2:20-24

20 You fool! Do you want to be shown that faith without actions is useless? **21** How was our ancestor Abraham put right with God? It was through his actions, when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. **22** Can't you see? His faith and his actions worked together; his faith was made perfect through his actions. **23** And the scripture came true that said, "Abraham believed God, and because of his faith God accepted him as righteous." And so Abraham was called God's friend. **24** You see, then, that it is by our actions that we are put right with God, and not by our faith alone.

Abraham didn't please God by following a bunch of rules. God hadn't even given out his rules yet! But Abraham kept showing that he believed God by keeping on doing things God told him to, including giving God his son. (If you don't know the story, Abraham showed he trusted God by offering his son on an altar, and God showed his own trustworthiness by giving Isaac back unharmed to Abraham.)

Next, James reminds us of another faith-and-actions example:

James 2:25

25 It was the same with the prostitute Rahab. She was put right with God through her actions, by welcoming the Israelite spies and helping them to escape by a different road.

Hundreds of years after Abraham, the Jewish people were moving into a new country. A big border city, Jericho, blocked their way. When spies went into Jericho to scope it out, a prostitute named Rahab saved them from the city guards and helped them escape. Before they left, she told the spies:

Joshua 2:8-13

"I know that the Lord has given you this land. Everyone in the country is terrified of you. **10** We have heard how the Lord dried up the Red Sea in front of you when you were leaving Egypt. We have also heard how you killed Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan. **11** We were afraid as soon as we heard about it; we have all lost our courage because of you. The Lord your God is God in heaven above and here on earth. **12** Now swear by him that you will treat my family as kindly as I have treated you, and give me some sign that I can trust you. **13** Promise me that you will save my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all their families! Don't let us be killed!"

Was Rahab a "good person"? Did she get saved by following the rules?

Rahab was saved because she decided whose side she wanted to be on, and then took action. So faith isn't about being "good enough", but it is about deciding to be on God's side, and acting like a loyal person.

In English we often use the word "faith" to mean something that goes on inside our heads, and we are more likely to use the word "faithful" to describe someone who does things to show their loyalty. But in the Greek of the Bible those are the same word!

So here's our memory verse, which is also the point of today's lesson. Repeat it a few times to yourself:

**"For as the body without the spirit is dead,
so faith without works is dead also."
(James 2:26)**

Let's make sure our faith in Jesus isn't only "spiritual" (or "ghostly") but actually lives in our own solid bodies too, shown by our actions!

That's how we can know and represent Jesus in the world around us.

[Click here for a helpful video](#) on God's faithfulness to us.

Close in Prayer: *"Dear Jesus, please help each one of us to live the way we believe this week. And please make our faith stronger so we can really trust in you and represent you in the world. Amen."*

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