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small group material



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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

FAITH THAT WORKS • Faith vs. Works

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

James 2:14-26

Introduction

Critical to understanding James' teaching on the relationship between faith and works is the overall theme of the book. That theme is "maturity" or "completeness." A mature Christian is one who has integrated, seamlessly, his faith with how he lives his life. His faith and actions aren't dichotomized, but integrated. James will also refer to this integrated life as wisdom.

In the books of the Old Testament you'll find dozens of literary genres: history, narrative, poetry, etc. One of those genres is referred to as "Wisdom Literature." Books like Proverbs, for example, detail what it means to live a life of wisdom and integrity. The book of James, in many respects, is a New Testament version of that genre, sketching a picture of Christian maturity and what it looks like to – practically speaking – integrate our faith in Christ with our actions.

This theme is laid out in James 1:22-27, where James tells his readers not to simply be hearers of the word, but doers, and that religion which is not put into practice has as much value as items sold at the Dollar Store.

The first part of the study is meant to point the group to this broader context before digging into the specific text (James 2:14-26). In this passage we'll see that one of the obstacles to putting faith into practice is the wrongful belief that faith and works are unrelated. James' argument is that faith and works, like the mature Christian lifestyle, are integrated, not dichotomized.

True Faith Produces Fruit

What's sticky about this passage is that, on the surface, it appears to contradict the clear biblical teaching that we are saved by faith alone. In the study, the group will look up passages that demonstrate the continuity of God's Word on this issue. While the Bible clearly teaches that we are saved by faith alone, it is also clear that true faith will always be evidenced by good works or "fruit" of some kind. I mean, if a person thinks he's a dog but never barks, sniffs himself, marks his territory or eats bones, he should probably wonder if the transformation ever took place, right? That's all James is saying.

Dead Faith

James advances his argument with three examples of dead faith, which are very helpful in understanding his meaning. The first example is of someone who professes to believe, but never expresses the smallest inclination of care for his neighbor. James asks the rhetorical question, "Can such a faith save him?" In other words, he's asking if such a person could possibly have a

What's the Big Idea?

The goal of this study is to understand the relationship between faith and works. We come to Christ through faith alone, but true faith always produces fruit (works).

What's the Problem?

The problem addressed in the passage is that our inclination is to limit faith to knowing facts about God as opposed to active belief which is expressed in actions.

That said, after reading the passage, our other tendency might be to muster up "works" to make sure we're acceptable to God. This would be the opposite error. Between the two lies grace-motivated obedience.





saving faith. The King James translation of this verse is problematic. It translates the verse, “Can faith save him?” This, of course, *would be* in conflict with what the rest of the Bible says about faith. James, however, isn’t questioning if we’re saved by faith, but questioning whether a sincere faith can lack any outer manifestation of it. Our lives, no doubt, abound with such examples of uncaring, but this isn’t the point. James is simply giving us a hypothetical example of a person who never shows the fruit of love and suggests that maybe his faith is just as hypothetical as the example itself.

The second example is that of demons. Clearly they believe in God, but they do not have a saving faith. Why? Because saving faith is more than intellectual knowledge or assent to something that’s true. It has an active component of trust that is expressed, in some way, in obedience. Satan knows that Jesus is Lord, he simply won’t bow.

The third example of dead faith comes in the form of a metaphor (vs.26), “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.” James’ concluding metaphor makes the relationship between faith and works very explicit: It’s impossible to think of a body moving around that doesn’t have life in it: equally bizarre would be a supposedly “living” body (read, saving faith) that never moves (read, produces fruit). How long can a supposed “living” body never move before you suspect it’s a corpse and assume it was never “born again”?

True Faith

Moving away from corpses and demons, James looks at some positive, more cheery examples – Abraham and Rahab. Their obedience demonstrated they had a sincere and saving faith. Abraham serves as a perfect example because God’s Word clearly says that it was Abraham’s faith that was credited to him as righteousness. So is James saying we’ve misread Genesis and that it was actually Abraham’s actions, not faith, that made him righteous? No. He is saying that his actions demonstrated the reality of his faith. Put negatively, could we say that Abraham really believed God if he wasn’t willing to sacrifice Isaac? His faith was consummated in his actions, showing his faith was sincere.

James has made a pretty solid case. Should they have had Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups in the first century, perhaps he might have mounted a final analogy of how the peanut butter and the chocolate go hand-in-hand and that if we were to be lacking either ingredient, you wouldn’t have a true Peanut Butter Cup...I guess we’ll never know.

True Integration

In discussing the integration of faith and works it’s critical to understand that it is not *both* that save us. No, no, no, no, no! It is by God’s grace, through faith alone that we are saved. But the nature of “genuine” faith is it cannot help but show up in our actions. Furthermore, the “works” that we do as a result of our faith are done out of a different motivation entirely. They are not an attempt to win God’s favor or earn salvation. Rather they flow from gratitude because we *have been* saved. They are reflexive of a heart that *has been* transformed by a new birth. In that sense, it’s not like a Peanut Butter Cup at all.

What’s Our Response?

It is critical for your group to understand the relationship of faith and works. We are saved by faith alone. Yet, if one truly has a saving faith and has Christ indwelling them, this should manifest itself in some form of obedience and fruit. This ‘fruit’ provides evidence to the world of the reality of a believer’s faith, and experiential security to the believer that he has been born again.

In making this point it will be important to make sure the group doesn’t knee-jerk in the other direction. See “True Integration” in the notes.

What Are the Questions?

James 2:14-26

LAUNCH

Have you ever had a superstitious belief? What did you believe about the superstition and how did it effect your actions? Aside from superstitions, think about what you did today. What were the beliefs that led you to do the things you did?

EXPLORE

Introduction

1. Read James 1:22-27. This is the major theme of the book of James. In your own words, summarize the theme.
2. According to what you've read in James so far, how does God produce maturity and bring about integration between what we believe and how we act?

The Study

3. Read 2:14-26. How do you see this section connecting with the main theme?
4. What words or phrases does James repeat throughout this section (look at verbs as well as nouns)? What is he trying to bring out?
5. Some have thought that what James says about faith and works contradicts other New Testament writers. Consider what Jesus, John and Paul have to say about the relationship between faith and works.

What does Jesus say about faith and works?
(Matthew 15:17-23)

What does John say is important evidence that we are children of God? (1 John 3:10,17-19)

What kind of faith counts as genuine saving faith?
(Galatians 5:6)

6. How does this compare with James 2:14-17?
7. In 2:16, James asks, "Can such a faith save him?" What is James questioning?
8. Why are we led to suspect that this person's faith (in 2:16) might not be genuine?
9. In 2:18, James' argument is set forth in the sample debate, "You have faith; I have deeds." If you actually overheard such an argument, how would you answer the debaters?
10. In 2:19, What is deficient in the faith of demons? How is it similar to a "dead" human faith?
11. In 2:20-25, using two examples, James makes his point that genuine faith is actively evidenced in the lives of believers. How do Abraham and Rahab demonstrate James' point?
12. Read Romans 6:1-11. How does this passage explain why it would be impossible for a sincere, saving faith to not produce fruit?
13. James is speaking to a general audience. Is there ever a time you might individually raise the question with someone that they are truly saved? If so, how would you do it? When would it not be appropriate?

APPLY

14. Even as believers, our hearts drift toward both of these errors: trying to earn God's favor through our performance and reducing our faith to mere verbal/mental assent. How have you seen this in your life?
15. How does a focus on "I need to do more" contradict the reality and power of the gospel in our lives as seen in Romans 6?
16. In what area of life (work, relationships, etc.) is it most difficult for you to put your faith into practice? Why? What blocks your faith from expressing itself in this way?
17. The gospel message is "repent and believe." It's also how we continue to live out the Christian life. Where do you need to repent, what do you need to believe?

What Are the Answers?

1. The theme of James is maturity, also referred to in James as wisdom, or completeness. This maturity manifests itself in a life that integrates faith with practice.
2. Trials are the vehicle by which God produces maturity, wisdom, and integrity. Temptation (the second study) is critical because it thwarts the results of the trials.
3. For James to encourage believers to put their faith into practice, he must show the critical relationship between faith and works.
4. Faith (11 times) and works (12 times). Also “say” (or claim) (vv. 14, 16) and “show” (and see) (vv. 18, 22, 24)
5. Have the group look up verses and record what they say.
6. Scripture is not divided on this. We are saved by faith alone, but Paul, Jesus, John, as well as James, affirm that true faith is always evidenced, in some way, by obedience (works).
7. James is not questioning whether faith can save us. It can and does. What he is questioning is whether such a person has a saving faith.
8. A lack of care or love for others.
9. They are connected. Faith is what saves us, but true faith will always produce fruit.
10. The example of demons clearly shows what James means by a dead faith. It is one of simply knowing certain facts are true, with no desire to respond or act on them.
11. Abraham and Rahab demonstrate this responsive component of true or sincere faith. As an onlooker, we would not have known Abraham had genuine faith until he actually attempted to sacrifice Isaac.
12. Saving faith results in a new birth. Through the Spirit, the resurrected Christ indwells us and seeks to live His life out in and through us.
13. Discuss. You would probably want to discourage such a conversation with a new believer.
14. It's important for the group to see that we all continue to have a tendency to fall back to one extreme or the other.
15. Human effort says, “I need to do more,” the gospel says, “God has already done it all.”
16. It's important for the group to see where their faith and actions are not in alignment and to probe the roots of “why?”
17. In locating areas of hypocrisy the gospel is not “try harder,” but repent and trust God – for forgiveness, cleansing and empowerment.

Memorize

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:8-10