

Lesson 7: Faith and Deeds

JAMES PROFILE



Genre: Epistle

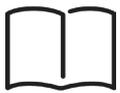
Author: James—likely the brother of Jesus

Passage: James 2:14-19

Where Is It: The New Testament: Hebrews, **James**, 1 Peter

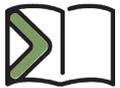
Key Characters: A brother or sister in Christ

Main Plot: James is telling the believers to not show favoritism between the poor and the rich, but instead to act compassionately toward those in need.



THE WORD

James 2:14-19



ENGAGE THE WORD

Lesson Overview: Physical Dimension

This is the seventh and final lesson in our series about the physical dimension of a missional life. In this lesson, students will wrestle with the balance between faith and action. We will explore the question, *What good is our faith if we never have any physical action to accompany it?*

In some ways, this may be a hard lesson to teach because often the church can become a place where all we do is talk about faith rather than showing examples of how our faith is being lived out. Embrace the prophetic challenge in this lesson. Honestly reflect on how well your church accompanies faith and action, how well your students put faith and action together, and how well you connect faith and action yourself.

This final lesson of the series drives home the point that the spiritual and physical dimensions of our lives are inseparable. Spirituality that does not move us to physical action is not true spirituality. In the same way, good deeds do not automatically mean true faith. The two are connected.

Biblical Commentary

JAMES 2:14-17

This passage begins with three rhetorical questions. The point James is making with these questions is that faith



Wesleyan Snapshot

John Wesley embodied the importance of works of mercy. He organized the Methodist class meetings to distribute food, clothing, and fuel to their local communities. He advocated for medical treatment and knowledge to those without access. Wesley consistently visited people in prison. He helped find non-interest loans for underprivileged who had fallen on hard times. He also argued against the evil injustices of the slave trade.

—Kenneth J. Collins,
The Theology of John Wesley



THE MAIN IDEA

SPIRITUALITY THAT DOES NOT MOVE US TO PHYSICAL ACTION IS NOT TRUE SPIRITUALITY. IN THE SAME WAY, GOOD DEEDS DO NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEAN TRUE FAITH. THE TWO ARE INSEPARABLE.

claims with no deeds are no good; such a faith will not save us. It is like someone who passes by a hungry and naked person, and rather than providing any real help, just wishes them well. This does no real good.

James says that if our faith is not accompanied by action, it is a dead faith. Only when our faith and actions are connected is our faith truly alive.

Much ink has been spilled over the contrast between James's teaching and Paul's teaching on what saves a person. Paul's resounding message is that we are not saved by good works or following the Law, but by Christ's grace and through faith alone. James's primary message is that faith cannot save us without accompanying good deeds. James's and Paul's teachings do not completely oppose each other, though. James is not saying that deeds save a person. He acknowledges that faith is what saves us, but if there are no good works that come with faith, then it is not true faith. Good deeds are the proof of genuine faith. This is similar to Paul's teaching about the fruits of the Spirit.

JAMES 2:18-19

James debates with an imaginary opponent who suggests that maybe for some people their thing is faith and for others their thing is works. He argues that faith is shown by one's deeds. Like Jesus's teaching about people being known by their fruit, James says that true faith will produce good deeds. You cannot have one without the other.

James hits his readers with some hard truths. Simply believing that there is one God is not enough. Even the demons believe this, and tremble in fear because of it. You can believe the right things about God, but still have an evil character. Faith has to be more than intellectual belief in a worldview or a list of truth propositions. True faith that demons could never have is one in which a person loves God and their neighbor as themselves.



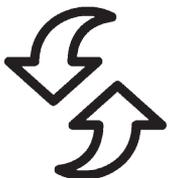
Bible Background

"James stands in a long and widespread biblical tradition. Isaiah called the people of his day to put real meaning into their religious rituals: 'share your food with the hungry'; 'provide the poor wanderer with shelter'; 'clothe [the naked]'—*then* God would answer when they called (Isaiah 58:7-9)."

—Douglas J. Moo,
*James: An Introduction
and Commentary*

"Not only have we denied the poor a piece of bread, but by thinking that they have no worth and leaving them abandoned in the streets, we have denied them the human dignity that is rightfully theirs as children of God."

—Mother Teresa,
No Greater Love



REFLECT ON THIS THEME:

Do your church and youth ministry encourage both faith and deeds?

REFLECT ON YOUR STUDENTS:

How do your students live out their faith rather than simply agreeing with the church's beliefs?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

**LESSON
OUTLINE**



Main Idea: Spirituality that does not move us to physical action is not true spirituality. In the same way, good deeds do not automatically mean true faith. The two are inseparable.

Resources: Bibles, copies of handout, writing utensils, poster board or whiteboard/markers

Connect to My Experience:
 Welcome and Weekly Highlights
 Prayer
 Bless Their Heart

Connect to the Word: Discuss James 2:14-19

Connect to My Life and the World:
 The Parable of the Ducks
 Local Service Opportunity

Closing: Affirmation and Prayer



CONNECT TO MY EXPERIENCE

Student Goal: Youth will learn about how faith must be lived out with action.

Welcome your students and ask them to share any highlights from their week. Be prepared to share some of your own highlights. This opening time helps the students know that you care about what happens in their lives. It also makes students more comfortable to speak up in the group.

Pray for the group, using the following prayer if you choose:

Lord, there is so much we don't understand about you and about our own lives. Please reveal yourself through your Scripture and the ideas we share in discussion so that we may better know and love you. Amen.

BLESS THEIR HEART

SAY: Have you heard the phrase “bless their heart?” It sounds like a pretty nice thing to say. The reality though, is that if someone is saying “bless their heart” about you, you are most likely being insulted. Apparently, it’s a thing some people tend to say to sugar coat the harsh words they might say about another person.

For example, you might hear someone say about your pastor after a sermon, “Well, you can’t expect to preach a great sermon every Sunday, bless their heart.” Sometimes “bless their heart” can come after the most hurtful comments. It’s a way of appearing to be polite and well-meaning, when it’s just a cover for meanness.

In this lesson, we will look at a letter by James. In it, he comes after those who claim to have faith but don’t have actions that match their faith. For James, a true follower of Jesus doesn’t just talk the talk but walks the walk. Claiming faith in Jesus but then ignoring the hungry and hurting people around you is like roasting someone with an insult then saying “bless your heart,” hoping that it will make you sound like a nice person.

ASK: When you think of the best Christians you've ever heard of, which names come to mind?

SAY: Many of you likely thought of people like Jesus's twelve apostles, Mother Teresa, Saint Francis, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Wesley. Something that all these people have in common is that they lived out their faith. They had great belief in God, but they also did powerful deeds of love for those around them. People who have the most faith are those who love people with concrete action.



CONNECT TO THE WORD

Student Goal: Youth will work to understand the passage and its practical implications through discussion and conversation.

Distribute copies of the student handout, along with writing utensils. Either as a group or as individuals, ask the students to answer the questions as you work through the passage.

READ: Have a student read James 2:14-17.

ASK: Do you think it's important for faith and deeds to go together? Why or why not?

What kinds of deeds is James saying should accompany our faith?

Have you ever ignored people who are hungry or in need? How did that feel?

SAY: James's letter requires us to be honest about ourselves and about the church. How often does our faith become a religious affiliation box that we check instead of something we live out? If our faith is real, it will fill us with love for our neighbors so that our automatic response to people is compassionate action.

READ: Have a student read James 2:18-19.

ASK: Can you have faith without deeds or deeds without faith?

What kind of faith would that be?

What more is there to Christianity besides believing in the existence of God?

SAY: James comes at us hard! Believing in the existence of the one God is good, but it's not enough. Even the demons know this. If you think just because you check the Christian box, you know a few verses, and you show up in church that you're good, James has a warning for you. How are you different from the demons?

Bless Their Heart, Continued

Check out this hilarious video about what "bless your heart" really means: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4nRIw_ATJA.

Saint Francis

St. Francis of Assisi believed the poorer or sicker a person was, the greater honor was due them. He and his followers, therefore, committed themselves to owning nothing, ministering to the lowly and becoming like them. They followed both the teaching and the footprints of Jesus.

Resource Suggestion

For a very convicting, but powerfully prophetic book, check out *Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne. If you don't like reading or don't have the time, you can watch this clip of Shane Claiborne from the documentary *Ordinary Radicals*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHHfoL-ZHT0>.

The difference, hopefully, is that when you have true faith, you are filled with love that overflows and spills out in actions. Too often all we ask of teenagers in the church is that you would just believe these statements of truth, tell us you accept them, and maybe come to the altar a few times to pray so we won't be anxious about your souls anymore.

But James and I are asking more of you. Yes, we want you to believe, but in a way that makes a difference in the world because the world needs you to come alive in your faith and help God transform it for good.

CREATIVE OPTION: DEEDS AND FAITH

Using a whiteboard or poster board, make a list together of what kinds of deeds should go with our faith. Ask the students which faith actions they find easy and which ones they find difficult.



CONNECT TO MY LIFE AND THE WORLD

Student Goal: Youth will consider how well the church combines faith and action and then have the chance to put their own faith into practice.

THE PARABLE OF THE DUCKS

There is a story about a town of ducks that is often attributed to the Christian philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. The story goes like this:

There is a thriving town of ducks. Every Sunday morning all the ducks waddle out of their homes. They waddle down the main street and into the church, sitting down in their pews. The duck choir sings beautiful music. Then the duck pastor waddles up to preach from the duck Bible.

The pastor encourages them, saying, "Ducks, God has given you wings! With these wings, you can fly! With these wings, you can rise up and soar like eagles! No walls can confine you, no fences can hold you. You have wings, and you can fly like birds!"

All the ducks in the pews shout, "Amen!"

And then they all *waddle* home.

ASK: In what ways are we sometimes like the duck church? How does this parable sound like the passage from James?

SAY: Help us to not be like the duck church. Let's envision ways in which we can take our faith in Jesus and join with God doing good, loving, compassionate deeds in the world.

LOCAL SERVICE OPPORTUNITY

It would be wrong for this lesson to just be talk. Take this closing time of the lesson to brainstorm ways you can serve your community. Work out when and where, then make sure to follow up so that it happens. If possible, involve your students in figuring out what kind of service project you will do. Challenge them to take ownership in working out the details. Examples of places you could serve include homeless shelters, disability communities, retirement homes, thrift stores, youth centers, recycling centers, or food pantries, but don't limit yourself to those.

If adding a service event is not an option for your group, consider closing your time together by writing letters to people who could use encouragement, such as seniors who can't leave their homes, military service personnel, global ministry partners, or children your church sponsors.



CLOSING

Reaffirm the following truths to your students:

1. Faith without deeds doesn't do anyone any good.
2. For it to be true faith, it takes more than just belief in God's existence, but godly deeds that flow from our faith.
3. The church needs students to help lead the way in compassionate actions that come from faith.

Close your lesson in prayer. Pray for your students, asking God that they will fall more in love with Jesus so that their love will overflow into their everyday lives and interactions.



Facilitator Note:

Be a leader for your students—share about how your own faith comes alive when it is connected to action. On a regular basis, consider sharing moments when you saw your faith and deeds align. It's not bragging. If you're lifting up God and giving him glory, then you're testifying to the faith God gives you. Our students are desperate to hear stories of how faith makes an impact in real life.