

FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 2:14–26

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

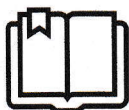
Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (James 2:26)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Every Sunday morning for over a year, her name has been Espoken during the Prayers of the People in a church in Pennsylvania, and one in Mississippi, and another in Georgia, and many others she does not even know. After a doctor sent her home saying what appeared on her lung scan was probably nothing, a year elapsed before more dramatic symptoms arose. A new doctor diagnosed that cancer had been present and growing. At first it did not seem clear whether she would survive the weekend, the week, the month. Her congregation, her friends near and far, and people she had never met began praying for her health, her spirits, and her family. They also prayed for her medical team to do its work, for the medications prescribed to be effective, and for each surgery she faced to be successful. Without action, in this case medical, she did not stand a chance of survival.

While this may seem self-evident in relation to a serious health situation, there are many other times we hear bad news and declare that those affected are in our thoughts and prayers but do not ask what we can do to resolve the situation. Thoughts are not deeds, and we may let the moment go by, excusing ourselves from action. We must think about what we believe, and we can and must pray for those in crisis, danger, and chronic need. But James does not prioritize our theological pondering or encourage our prayer practices. They are not only not enough, but they are dead to him; he declares our works are our faith.

Holy God, as we search our minds and hearts, may we also search our gifts and skills for serving you and find opportunities to put our faith into action. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

James 2:14–26

2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A WORD ABOUT WORKS

Martin Luther, author of the Protestant Reformation, did not care much for the letter from James. He thought the author’s themes contradicted the tradition of Paul’s teaching, and he particularly objected to the idea that Christians could be saved by anything other than faith. If we approach the epistle with Luther’s criticism in mind, we might be suspicious of the principles James declared. “Can faith save you?” This question in James 2:14 may provoke us if our faith background teaches us to rely on changes of heart or commitments of mind. James is practical. How will it help a hungry person or a person without warm clothes to say you are praying for them? For James, our actions express our faith.



Pastor Betty Rendón came to the United States from Colombia and applied for asylum. As a school principal in her home coun-

try, she faced death threats from guerrilla forces after she prevented their members from recruiting among her students. Her asylum request was denied in 2009, but no action was taken by US immigration officials. She stayed in the United States with her family, risking arrest rather than returning to Colombia to face certain death.

Over the next ten years, Betty, her husband, Carlos, and their daughter settled into lives and work. A granddaughter was born. Betty became a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was called to serve a local church, and was about to begin doctoral studies at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago when ICE agents arrested the family.¹ Betty was in her pajamas when agents burst into her home. It was left unlocked and then burgled before her daughter, protected by DACA, was released to return home with her five-year-old.

At the time of Pastor Betty's arrest, I was leading an online community of clergywomen from many denominations. A pastor who knows Betty personally, Rev. Emily Heitzman, reached out to me and asked if she could write something for our group's website about the family's situation. When the post² was published, it did more than tell the story and place the immigration questions in theological context. Emily made sure to include a Call to Action, with steps to take to support Pastor Betty. These included links and addresses for making donations both to a legal fund and a general expenses fund, the address of her church for sending cards and letters, the link to a petition demanding the family's release, and suggestions for supporting detained immigrants in our own communities. All of those actions are expressions of faith.

 **How have you helped people in trouble? How did you know what to do?**

RECEIPTS

James includes two references to Hebrew Scripture in this passage, arguing that Abraham (in Genesis 15 and 22) and Rahab

1. Carlos Ballesteros, "She's a DACA recipient. ICE agents still arrested her. Then they went after her parents," *Chicago Sun Times*, chicago.suntimes.com/2019/5/21/18628337/daca-ice-chicago-detention-immigration-arrest-paula-hincapie-rendon-lutheran-school-theology.
2. revgalblogpals.org/2019/05/20/the-pastoral-is-political-free-pastor-betty-rendon/.

(in Joshua 2) exemplify the kind of faith-seen-in-works he promotes. James takes a sharp turn in his reasoning in this passage. Even if we parse the word “works” as “acts” or “deeds,” up to this point James’s emphasis has been on offering help to people in need. We may have some questions, then, about the meaning of the Abraham story he references, in which Abraham comes very close to sacrificing his son, Isaac, on an altar.

The binding of Isaac was meant to illustrate our God’s difference from the pagan gods who demanded worship through sacrifice. Perhaps James means to indicate Abraham’s active faith in God, a belief so deep that it compelled him to trust and to act on that trust even to the point of risking his long-awaited son. As twenty-first century Christians, we may find the scenario uncomfortable or even intolerable. It would be an easier connection to make if Abraham and Isaac had gone down to the soup kitchen as an example for service to the community. James may have chosen Abraham as an example because Paul did, in order to make a contrasting argument.

Rahab also stretches James’s model. She offered help to a pair of Israelite spies who had sneaked into Jericho to get the lay of the land, hiding them on the roof of her brothel. When the king’s forces came looking for the men, she lies to keep them safe. She tells the spies she knows about the destruction perpetrated on other towns. Their God must really be God! They agree to protect her extended family as long as she keeps their secret. Rahab’s testimony to God’s power is more than words; her works help preserve the Israelites.

Perhaps James meant to have his readers know that works of faith will not always be neat and tidy. We may be called to risk our own safety or the safety of those we love. Certainly James, the brother of Jesus, and the other leaders of the early church did just that. The risk may be to our bodies, but it may also be to our reputations, our social positions, or our expectations of success. It may take simpler forms, such as changing jobs, or moving, or sacrificing time and money to respond to God’s call. These actions and others like them demonstrate our trust in God and meet James’s definition of works. James is not looking for a change of heart or a new mindset; he wants receipts for what we have done.

 What risks have you taken because you trust God?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Okay then, churches. How do we know what to do so that our works will show our faith? Lots of congregations write checks, but the most life-changing faith expressions come through hands-on action. The kind of works that do the most good in the world grow out of our genuine concerns for the people around us and employ the gifts God has given us. Community organizing can provide a framework for discerning and acting on needs outside the church.

In 2006, a church in Herndon, Virginia, wondered how to respond to the increase of predominantly Spanish-speaking immigrant day laborers living and seeking work in their suburban community. A day labor center had opened to aid in placement for the workers and discourage them from hanging around in public spaces hoping to be hired. Church leaders decided to invite workers to come for lunch and went to the center with the church van. It was an experiment to which only four said yes the first day. Now three churches provide lunch followed by Spanish language worship and Bible study. They feed between 40 to 180 people weekly, in body and spirit.

Co-pastor Rev. Becca Gillespie-Messman was the new associate pastor when the work began; church members relied on her Spanish-language skills to help start the program. A decade later she teaches the community organizing principles that helped the congregation move not only to a sense of mutual understanding but also to an action plan. The foundation of community organizing is people talking to people, one at a time. A one-on-one is not an interview but a conversation in which people talk about what their interests are. (Unitarian Universalist pastor Rev. Louise Green has written a helpful article about how to organize yourself for relational meetings, “Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing.”¹) Another building block is a power analysis, a careful consideration of who has influence in the congregation and could either help a new effort fly or shoot it down. It’s worth noting that people with power may or may not hold official leadership positions, and people with official leadership positions may or may not have influence.

The components of organizing are straightforward: people take the time to assess needs in the community, find their

1. www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/greenlouise/seeds_relationalorg.pdf.

mutual interest, note available gifts and talents, include people who have influence, plan the actions they will take, and finally debrief with those involved. Everyone has a chance to offer feedback and learn from what went well and what did not. In our collective effort, we can show our faith by our works.

? What are the needs in your community? What gifts does your congregation have to meet them?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. James alludes to Genesis 15:6 when he says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (v. 23).
2. Paul also alludes to Genesis 15:6 in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6, but in those instances, Paul's emphasis is faith over works as a basis of salvation.
3. Verse 19, "You believe that God is one," refers to one of the most basic tenets of the Jewish faith. See Deuteronomy 6:4.
4. The actions of Rahab are recounted in Joshua 2:1–21.
5. Abraham and Rahab are both cited as examples of faith in Hebrews 11 (verses 8–19 and verse 31, respectively).

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Aug. 17	Unwise Not to Listen to Teachers	Proverbs 5:7–14
T	Aug. 18	Testimony of a Wise Teacher	Isaiah 50:4–11
W	Aug. 19	Slander and Abusive Language Not Allowed	Colossians 3:1–11
Th	Aug. 20	Use Tongue to Speak God's Praise	Psalms 119:169–76
F	Aug. 21	Believers Anointed with Fire and Tongues	Acts 2:1–12
Sa	Aug. 22	Tongues and Teachers Are God's Gifts	1 Corinthians 12:27–31