

JAMES

MARK IT UP

James 2:14-26 **LEADER** Discussion Guide

Week of 4/3/22

Icebreaker: We're just a couple weeks away from Easter. What are your plans for celebrating Easter weekend?

Getting Started: Read James 2:14-26 as a group.

Select 2-3 questions that you think will be most helpful for your discussion.

1. How would you summarize James' line of thinking in verses 14-17?
James is saying that true saving faith is visible. It takes action and makes a difference in how one lives. Conversely, there are people who claim to have faith, but their "faith" doesn't make a difference in how they live their lives. James claims that this "workless" faith is worthless.

Application: How well does this fit your understanding of what saving faith entails?

2. In verses 18-19, James anticipates an argument that "faith" (that is, only believing certain things) and works are two different options for the Christian life. What do you think about that argument?
James is demonstrating that faith and works go hand-in-hand. Works that are separated from faith are empty in an ultimate sense because they lack belief in Jesus. So also, faith that lacks action is like the person telling the brother or sister in need, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled" (v. 16). You might as well say, "Good luck! Hope it all turns out ok."

Application: What's an example of something you believe by faith but you find it difficult to take action in response to that belief? Why do you think it's hard?

3. In verse 19, James makes the argument that, "Even the demons believe—and shudder!" What point do you think James is making?
We shouldn't read too far into this to try to determine all the doctrinal beliefs of demons, but James is making the very good point that even spiritual beings who are adamantly opposed to God know that there's one true God. Even so, we'd never say they have a saving faith! "You believe that God is one" is almost certainly a reference to Deuteronomy 6:4—a core OT belief and it was regularly recited in Israel's worship.

Application: How could this highlight the danger of being self-deceived about our faith?

James talked repeatedly in chapter 1 about the danger of being self-deceived and it seems appropriate to ponder that idea here as well. Filling our heads with a lot of knowledge about God can lead us to think our faith must be real. This verse cautions us against that assumption.

4. James turns to two OT examples to make the point that faith apart from works is *useless* (literally in the Greek, it “doesn’t work”). What was it about Abraham and Rahab that demonstrated their faith?

Abraham and Rahab could not be more different on the surface! One is the patriarch of the faith; the other is a prostitute! Both, though, are commended for the actions they took in response to what they believed. In the line of James’ argument, their “faith” would have done them no good if they had not taken action. It may be worth flipping back to Genesis 22 to read about Abraham and to Joshua 2 to read about Rahab.

Application: What can you learn from their examples to encourage your own faith?

5. These verses from James have long been controversial because of how they appear to contradict that we are “saved by grace through faith” Eph 2:8. Paul’s major contention is that we are justified by faith, not works. How can we reconcile these with James’ argument that “faith without works is dead”?

This question assumes a level of familiarity with the Bible that some in your group may not have. It could be helpful, then, to refer to passages like Ephesians 2:8-10 and Romans 5:1. Also, Romans 4:1-3 (which cites Genesis 15:6) seems to contradict what James says about Abraham. Some believe that the differences between what James claims and what Paul claims are simply irreconcilable. A closer look, though, can lead us to find common ground. Paul’s emphasis on *salvation by faith apart from works* pertains to how one comes to a right relationship with God. James’ emphasis, on the other hand, is on what a saving faith looks like once someone has come into this relationship. Commentator Douglas Moo writes, “Paul wants to make clear that one ‘gets into’ God’s kingdom only by faith; James insists that God requires works from those who *are* ‘in’” (Tyndale New Testament Commentary, p. 114). John Calvin put it this way: “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.” Moo explains, “The difference between Paul and James consists in the *sequence* of works and conversion: Paul denies any efficacy to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works.”

Application: If “faith apart from works is useless,” what kind of “works” or actions are you engaged in that demonstrate your faith? Is there an area of your life where you need to begin taking action?