

Episode: James Series No. 01

Narrator: James

Primary Scriptures: James 1:19-27; 2:8-26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12

Story Summary: Verses with content about faith and faithfulness

Location: Kingdom of Judea (Israel)

Time: Circa 50 AD

Suggested Memory Scriptures: James 1:19, 22, 27; 2:8, 14, 17; 3:1

In modern times, one of the most hotly debated Bible verses is found in James 2:17, best known as, “Faith without accompanying deeds is dead.” It is not the purpose of this video episode or study guide to examine this verse in detail, nor to compare and contrast it to Paul’s writings. However, since the verse is so crucial to James’ thought process, it is our intent to put context around what he wrote.

It is crucial to understand what James means by the word “faith.” The Greek word he uses is *pistis*, which, according to at least one scholar, can also be translated *faithfulness*, *reliability*, or *loyalty*. It can mean *belief*, but it can also point to the personal commitment that accompanies any genuine belief.¹ As shown by all of the surrounding verses, James is clearly using the word in the latter sense. When used that way, almost by definition “faith without works is dead.”

Why is this point so crucial to James? *James* is possibly the first written book of the New Testament. He writes it not as a theological treatise, but as practical instructions for early Christians trying to cope with a fast-changing world. James is the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and the people in his church are struggling to survive, ravaged by famine and economic punishment from the Jewish leaders.

More than any other Christian leader, James knows it is one thing to say you theoretically believe in helping poor people, but another thing entirely to actually help them. He knows that if surrounding churches don’t act on their belief by helping his church members, then some of them will likely soon be dead. He is not making a theoretical theological statement; he is making a statement of fact.

With those things in mind, verses such as James 1:22, 1:27, and 2:14-25 might be statements of fact, in addition to theological observations, that support his conclusion in James 2:26: faith without accompanying deeds is dead.

Accompanying deeds don’t just mean physical actions but can also include the words that people use. James spends much of his letter emphasizing the importance of controlling our speech.

¹ N.T. Wright, “Paul, A Biography” page 90

Discussion Questions:

1. Explain two ways the word “faith” can be understood. Using the weather, give a simple example of how both meanings could be used.
2. Why was James so concerned about the welfare of his church in Jerusalem?
3. In James 1:22, James cautions against hearing the word, but not doing anything about what you hear. What does James say that accomplishes?
4. According to James 1:26-27, what are some things truly religious people do?
5. What good does it do to tell a hungry person to go in peace and be well fed?
 1. *Faith* can mean *belief*, or it can mean *belief accompanied by deeds that confirm belief*. You could say that you believe it will snow a lot tomorrow, but you don’t believe it enough to take precautions; or, you could say that you believe it will snow a lot tomorrow so you actually act by changing to snow tires and stocking up on food.
 2. His church members were very poor and were in danger of starving due to famines and persecutions from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.
 3. It causes us to deceive ourselves if we don’t do what the word says.
 4. Control what they say, take care of widows and orphans, keep from being polluted by the world.
 5. It does no good.

Application Questions:

1. It is common for people to beg for money. What sorts of things should you consider before reacting to their requests?
2. What does it mean to look after orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27)? Is there a practical way you could do that in the near future?
3. Consider James 2:17. Using that verse literally, which aspects of your faith life would you prove to be alive, and which would you prove to be dead?

Applications Questions for Teens:

1. James 3:9-10 indicates that we have the ability to say good things and bad things, that we can praise God and curse those around us. How could you change the way you think and act so that you don’t do that?
2. James 4:11 says not to slander our brothers and sisters. In the modern world, that loosely translates into not saying bad things about those around us. In the last week, did you do that? How can you wean yourself from this type of behavior?
3. Christians are often criticized for being hypocritical. By that, most critics probably mean that Christians don’t act in accordance with what they say they believe. Do you find that to actually be true, or do critics misunderstand Christianity? Use a current hot button topic as an example, and use actual facts to support your answer.