

The Letter of James  
Bible Study Session 06  
James 2:14-26

Greek NT	Elberfelder	NRSV	NLT
<p>14 Τί τὸ ὄφελος, ἀδελφοί μου, ἐὰν πίστιν λέγη τις ἔχειν ἔργα δὲ μὴ ἔχη; μὴ δύναται ἡ πίστις σῶσαι αὐτόν; 15 ἐὰν ἀδελφὸς ἢ ἀδελφὴ γυμνοὶ ὑπάρχωσιν καὶ λειπόμενοι τῆς ἐφημέρου τροφῆς 16 εἶπη δὲ τις αὐτοῖς ἐξ ὑμῶν, Ὑπάγετε ἐν εἰρήνῃ, θερμαίνεσθε καὶ χορτάζεσθε, μὴ δῶτε δὲ αὐτοῖς τὰ ἐπιτήδεια τοῦ σώματος, τί τὸ ὄφελος; 17 οὕτως καὶ ἡ πίστις, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχη ἔργα, νεκρά ἐστὶν καθ' ἑαυτήν.</p>	<p>14 Was nützt es, meine Brüder, wenn jemand sagt, er habe Glauben, hat aber keine Werke? Kann etwa der Glaube ihn erretten? 15 Wenn aber ein Bruder oder eine Schwester dürftig gekleidet ist und der täglichen Nahrung entbehrt, 16 aber jemand unter euch spricht zu ihnen: Geht hin in Frieden, wärmt euch und sättigt euch! ihr gebt ihnen aber nicht das für den Leib Notwendige, was nützt es?</p>	<p>14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,</p>	<p>14 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? 15 Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, 16 and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? 17 So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.</p>
<p>18 Ἀλλ' ἐρεῖ τις, Σὺ πίστιν ἔχεις, κἀγὼ ἔργα ἔχω· δεῖξόν μοι τὴν πίστιν σου χωρὶς τῶν ἔργων, κἀγὼ σοὶ δεῖξω ἐκ τῶν ἔργων μου τὴν πίστιν. 19 σὺ πιστεύεις ὅτι εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ θεός, καλῶς ποιεῖς· καὶ τὰ δαιμόνια πιστεύουσιν καὶ φρίσσουν. 20 θέλεις δὲ γνῶναι, ὧ ἄνθρωπε κενέ, ὅτι ἡ πίστις χωρὶς τῶν ἔργων ἀργή ἐστίν; 21 Ἀβραὰμ ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη ἀνελέγκας Ἰσαὰκ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον; 22 βλέπεις ὅτι ἡ πίστις συνήργει τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἔργων ἡ πίστις ἐτελειώθη, 23 καὶ ἐπληρώθη ἡ γραφὴ ἣ λέγουσα, Ἐπίστευσεν δὲ Ἀβραὰμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην καὶ φίλος θεοῦ ἐκλήθη. 24 ὁρᾶτε ὅτι ἐξ ἔργων δικαιούται ἄνθρωπος καὶ οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως μόνον. 25 ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ Ῥαὰβ ἡ πόρνη οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη ὑποδεξαμένη τοὺς ἀγγέλους καὶ ἐτέρα ὁδῶ ἐκβαλοῦσα; 26 ὡς περ γὰρ τὸ σῶμα χωρὶς πνεύματος νεκρὸν ἐστίν, οὕτως καὶ ἡ πίστις χωρὶς ἔργων νεκρά ἐστίν.</p>	<p>17 So ist auch der Glaube, wenn er keine Werke hat, in sich selbst tot. 18 Es wird aber jemand sagen: Du hast Glauben, und ich habe Werke; zeige mir deinen Glauben ohne Werke, und ich werde dir aus meinen Werken den Glauben zeigen. 19 Du glaubst, daß [nur] einer Gott ist? Du tust recht; auch die Dämonen glauben und zittern. 20 Willst du aber erkennen, o eitler Mensch, daß der Glaube ohne die Werke nutzlos ist? 21 Ist nicht Abraham, unser Vater, aus Werken gerechtfertigt worden, da er Isaak, seinen Sohn, auf den Opferaltar legte? 22 Du siehst, daß der Glaube mit seinen Werken zusammen wirkte und der Glaube aus den Werken vollendet wurde. 23 Und die Schrift wurde erfüllt, welche sagt: `Abraham aber glaubte Gott, und es wurde ihm zur Gerechtigkeit gerechnet, und er wurde `Freund Gottes genannt. 24 Ihr seht [also], daß ein Mensch aus Werken gerechtfertigt wird und nicht aus Glauben allein. 25 Ist aber nicht ebenso auch Rahab, die Hure, aus Werken gerechtfertigt worden, da sie die Boten aufnahm und auf einem anderen Weg hinausließ? 26 Denn wie der Leib ohne Geist tot ist, so ist auch der Glaube ohne Werke tot.</p>	<p>16 and 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? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.</p>	<p>18 Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds." 19 You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. 20 How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless? 21 Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. 23 And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God. 24 So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone. 25 Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. 26 Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.</p>

## The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>

### Context of our passage:

PRAESCRIPTIO BODY	STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT Of James <sup>2</sup>	
		1.1
	1-194	1.2-5.20
Facing Trials	1-15	1.2-12
God and Temptation	16-24	1.13-18
The Word and Piety	25-37	1.19-27
Faith and Partiality	38-55	2.1-13
Faith and Works	56-72	2.14-26

### Exegesis of the Text:

#### 1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

**Genre.** In the second section of chapter two, vv. 14-26, we continue to see the same basic literary patterns that are found in chapter one. In these words we see both ancient *paraenesis* (moral admonition) and more precisely ancient Jewish wisdom literary thought expression. But the arrangement of material is somewhat different, as is noted below in the Literary Structure discussion.

**Literary Setting.** As the above outline indicates by the line spacing between headings, chapter two focuses on the nature of Christian faith. Verses 14-26 continues the discussion of true faith, but this time with a strong focus on the eternal consequences of failing to possess genuine faith in Christ. While in vv. 1-13 faith was inconsistent with discrimination, in verses 14-26 faith is ministry action and obedience to God's commands.

**Literary Structure.** The threefold structure here remains essentially the same as in the previous verses of 1-13. This can be charted out in the block diagram below.

(56)	2.14	<b>What good is it,</b> my brothers, if one claims to have faith, but -- does not have works?	<b>Principle</b>
(57)		<b>Such faith is not able to save him, is it?</b>	

	2.15	If a brother or sister is without adequate clothes and lacking in daily food, and -- one from among you say to them, "Blessings on you, keep warm, eat to your heart's content,"	<b>Illustration</b>
(58)	2.16	but -- you do not give them the necessities of life, <b>what good is it?</b>	
(59)	2.17	So also if not accompanied by works, <b>such faith is dead</b> by itself.	

<sup>1</sup>With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the 'historical meaning' of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, "What does the text mean to us today?" For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief.

<sup>2</sup>Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, *A Study Manual of James: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. **Statements** indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the [James Study internet site](#).

- 2.18 But  
60) **someone raises the objection,**  
"You have faith  
and  
I have works."
- 61) **Prove to me your faith apart from works.**  
and  
62) **I will prove to you my faith by my works.**
- 63) 2.19 **Do you believe**  
that there is only one God?
- 64) **You do well;**  
also  
65) **the demons believe**  
and  
66) **----- tremble in fear.**
- 2.20 Now  
67) **do you wish to know,**  
O empty-headed one,  
that faith...is useless?  
apart from works
- 68) 2.21 **Was not Abraham our father vindicated**  
by works  
when he offered up Isaac his son  
upon the altar?
- 69) 2.22 **You can see**  
that his faith worked together  
with his works,  
and  
----- his faith was brought to completeness,  
2.23 and  
----- the scripture was fulfilled,  
which says,  
"Abraham believed God  
and  
it was counted to him  
as righteousness."  
and  
he was called Friend of God.
- 70) 2.24 **You see**  
that a person is vindicated  
by works  
and  
not by faith alone.
- 2.25 And  
in a similar way  
also  
71) **was not Rahab the prostitute vindicated**  
by works  
when she took in the messengers  
and  
----- sent them out by another way?

2.25	And in a similar way also
(71)	<b>was not Rahab the prostitute vindicated</b> by works when she took in the messengers and ----- sent them out by another way?
2.26	For just as the body...is dead apart from the spirit,
(72)	<b>so also faith...is dead.</b> apart from works

**Summary:**

In a similar pattern to 2:1-13 where the core rhetorical structure began with a basic spiritual principle, then was illustrated, and thirdly was defended and explained in detail, 2:14-26 follows essentially the same rhetorical structure. To be sure, the particulars are developed differently, but the foundational pattern is the same.

The basic spiritual principle, found in core statements 56 and 57 (verse 14), sets forth the premise that authentic faith naturally leads to a life of obedience to the Lord. Two rhetorical questions are used to forcefully introduce this position, and they are tied together with connections both logically and with formal grammar. Also expressed in these statements is that a non-working faith has no salvational power. That is, for faith to be real it must be more than mere words; concrete actions have to flow from it. Thus, issues with eternal implications are at stake here. The negative side of a faith claim is used via a hypothetical person ("if one claims") making a claim to faith but without backing it up in deeds. This will set a pattern for the remainder of the passage, since hypothetical situations will resurface further into the author's discussion. Whether or not the author originally had a specific person, or group of persons, in mind during the composition of these words can't be determined with certainty. But the text certainly points toward having historical individuals in mind. Very doubtful, however, is the earlier Tübingen school view expressed by F.C. Bauer in the late 1800s that this hypothetical person was none other than the Apostle Paul. The specific identification of an individual or Christian group in the middle of the first Christian century is impossible, given the limited information available.

The illustration of the author's premise is contained in statements 58 and 59 (verses 15-17). Although the specific setting where the Christian brother and sister in dire need interact with the believing community isn't clearly identified, the close parallels of this illustration to the one in 2:2-4 argue strongly that the setting is a worship service here also, just as it was clearly identified before. Here, however, instead of discriminatory treatment of visitors to the worship service, the issue now is that of horrible neglect to minister to basic needs of those inside the community of faith. To be sure, hyperbole is clearly used in the language of James in describing the situation, but this strong language serves to make a dramatic point, driving home his view about the nature of authentic faith.

When the author begins to expand and defend his view in statements 60 through 72 (verses 18-26), he develops this section in two segments. In the underlying Greek text this shines forth very clearly but, because of the English language use of the personal pronoun 'you' for both singular and plural expressions, this distinction is completely washed out in translation.

The first tier of elaboration in statements 60 through 69 (vv. 18-23), the 'you' is singular. In statement 60, James introduces an objection to his stance in verses 14-17. Statements 61 through 69 constitute a carefully crafted response to his objector. He draws upon an ancient Greek literary device popularly called a "straw man" in statement 60; this 'straw man' serves as a sounding board for James to develop his view in greater detail while obliterating any possible objection to his view. The objection, "You have faith, and I have works," frames the structure of the response, which occurs at two levels. To be sure, the foundational issue is not that one person possesses faith and another possesses works. Implied in this is a dicotomy between faith and deeds of obedience, suggesting that the two have little essential connection to one another. James ardently rejects the validity of this. His response is more focused on addressing the falseness of this dicotomy.

Statement 61 challenges the objector to "prove his faith," which James is convinced can't be done apart from deeds of obedience. He subsequently elaborates on this point in statements 64 through 66, where he assumes his objector will point to sabbatic worship recitation of the [Shema](#) as proof of authentic faith. In dramatic fashion the author rejects this ancient worship practice as evidence of true faith. Sure, one needs to orally confess faith, but mere confession is no indicator of authentic faith.

Statement 62 declares that the author's claim to faith can be verified by his deeds of obedience. In his elaboration of this point in statements 67 through 69, instead of pointing to expressions of faith in his own life, the author points to the father of the Jewish people, Abraham, as his evidence. Drawing upon patterns of first century

