

Springboard Scripture Matthew 7:21

This warning from the Lord establishes the terrifying possibility that one can acknowledge Jesus verbally and intellectually yet be rejected at the judgment for a lack of obedient action.

Hook

- A man can hold a deed to a property, but if the signature is forged, the paper is worthless regardless of how authentic it appears to the casual observer.
- In the spiritual realm, countless souls hold a document they call "faith," firmly believing it entitles them to an inheritance in heaven.
- They recite the correct doctrines with precision. They occupy a pew every Sunday. They nod in agreement with the truth of Scripture. Yet, beneath this veneer of religious observance, there is no pulse of obedience.
- There is no sacrifice. There is no transformation of the will. The tragedy of the contemporary religious landscape is the widespread acceptance of a belief system that promises salvation without submission.
- It is a comfortable, sedative delusion that allows a man to feel saved while maintaining total sovereignty over his own life.
- This is not merely a theological error or a difference in denominational perspective; it is a fatal spiritual condition that leaves the "believer" just as lost as the skeptic. The epistle of James confronts this deception head-on, refusing to let professed faith stand unchallenged when it produces no corresponding action.

Introduction

- The brother of our Lord addresses this fatal condition with surgical precision in the second chapter of his epistle.
 - He does not write to comfort the comfortable; he writes to interrogate the validity of their hope.
 - **James is not engaged in a theological dispute about earning salvation through meritorious works of the Law; that is the battle Paul fights in Romans. James is fighting a different enemy: the lethargy of "easy believism."**

- He distinguishes between a living, saving trust that unites the soul to God, and a demonic, dead assent that acknowledges facts without surrendering the will.
- He summons **two witnesses to the stand**—**Abraham** the father of the faithful and **Rahab** the gentile outcast—to prove that justification has always, in every dispensation, required a faith that moves the hands and feet. The question he poses is haunting and unavoidable: "**Can that faith save him?**" The answer we find in the text determines not just our theology, but where we will spend eternity. Genuine justifying faith is never alone; it is a living conviction that is inevitably demonstrated and perfected by active obedience.

Thesis Genuine, justifying faith is never alone; it is a living conviction that is inevitably demonstrated and perfected by active obedience.

Lesson Alignment (Bloom's Taxonomy)

I. Faith and Works Together

A. The rhetorical question exposing the futility of professed faith

- I. The initial challenge: what profit in saying faith without works
- II. The pointed inquiry: can that kind of faith save him

"What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" (James 2:14)

James confronts a hypothetical claim of faith that remains verbal only. The term "use" translates *ophelos*, denoting any practical advantage or gain—profit, benefit, or usefulness in a real-world sense. The second question is a classic Greek rhetorical device expecting an emphatic negative answer, reinforced by the particle *mē* (which anticipates "no"). The demonstrative "that faith" (*hē pistis ekeinē*) sharply distinguishes this mere verbal profession from authentic, living faith that saves. James is not questioning whether faith saves—he affirms it elsewhere implicitly—but whether a faith that produces nothing can possibly be the real article.

a. **Application:** Do not trust in words alone. If your faith shows only in what you say about God and never in what you do for God, it has no saving value. Examine yourself now—does your

faith change your daily choices?

b. Cross References from OT and NT:

i. Ezekiel 33:31-32

"They come to you as people come, and sit before you as My people and hear your words, but they do not do them; for they do the lustful desires expressed by their mouth, and their heart goes after their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say but they will not do it."

Ezekiel exposes Israel's hypocritical listening: they treat the prophetic word as entertainment—pleasant but powerless to change behavior—because their hearts remain fixed on greed. This mirrors James' critique of verbal faith without works: hearing (or saying) the truth without obedience renders the entire exercise spiritually barren and invites judgment.

ii. Matthew 7:21-23

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name...?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Jesus directly parallels James: mere verbal profession ("Lord, Lord")—even accompanied by impressive religious activity—means nothing without doing the Father's will. The phrase "workers of lawlessness" (*hoi ergazomenoi tēn anomian*) highlights ongoing disobedience, showing that faith without obedient works is not saving faith but a self-deception that ends in rejection.

c. Application from Cross References: Just as Ezekiel warns against treating God's word as mere entertainment without life-change, and Jesus rejects those who claim Him without obedience, evaluate your spiritual life beyond church attendance or verbal prayers. In your workplace or relationships, does your professed faith lead to ethical decisions and acts of

integrity? Teach this to young believers: model that true faith transforms behavior, preventing a generation from empty religiosity.

B. The concrete illustration of empty benevolence

- I. The scenario: a brother or sister lacking clothing and daily food
- II. The hollow response: go in peace, be warmed and filled
- III. The failure to provide bodily necessities

"If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?" (James 2:15–16)

The example targets covenant family obligation. "Without clothing" (*gymnos*) indicates severe deprivation, not literal nakedness but critical lack. "Daily food" (*ephemerou trophes*) means subsistence-level provision. The dismissive blessing mimics pious language while shifting responsibility away from the speaker. The repeated "what use is that" parallels verse 14, showing verbal faith produces the same spiritual profitlessness as verbal charity.

a. **Application:** When you see a brother or sister in real need, do not limit yourself to kind words or prayers alone. Use what you have to meet the need. Failing to act when you can help makes your faith useless in the eyes of God and man.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **Isaiah 58:6-7** "Is this not the fast which I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

Isaiah exegetes true worship versus hypocritical fasting: God rejects ritual without justice and mercy. True devotion actively shares food, shelters the homeless, and clothes the naked—treating the needy as "your own flesh." This directly parallels James' illustration: empty words of blessing are as useless as empty fasting when action is withheld.

ii. **1 John 3:17-18** "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word

or talk but in deed and in truth."

John insists that genuine love (and by extension genuine faith) cannot remain verbal.

Possessing resources and seeing need demands action; closing the heart reveals the absence of God's love. The phrase "not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" is almost a direct echo of James' critique of empty benevolence.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Drawing from Isaiah's call to active mercy and John's insistence on deed-based love, respond to needs in your community—such as volunteering at food banks or supporting struggling families—with practical help, not just well-wishes. In a consumer-driven culture, this challenges us to prioritize generosity over accumulation, fostering church unity and witnessing God's love to outsiders through visible compassion.

C. The decisive verdict on inactive faith

- I. The parallel: just as words without action are useless
- II. The conclusion: faith without works is dead, being by itself

"Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." (James 2:17)

"**Even so**" (*houtōs kai*) draws the direct analogy from the illustrations. "Dead" (*nekra*) evokes a corpse—outward form without life or function. "Being by itself" (*kata heautēn*) stresses isolation: this faith is severed from the obedient works that give it vitality, existing only as a solitary mental assent. This is not merely weak faith but lifeless faith, incapable of justification, deliverance, or fruit.

Truth: Faith that produces no obedience is spiritually lifeless and possesses no saving power.

a. **Application:** A dead faith brings no life to your home or to the next generation. Parents, show your children that real faith obeys God in small and large things every day. Do not teach them by words only that God is worth following—show them by your actions.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **Deuteronomy 15:7-8** "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be."

Moses commands open-handed generosity as evidence of covenant obedience. Hardening the heart against the needy violates God's law and the command to love neighbor as self. Isolated "faith" without merciful works contradicts the Torah's holistic ethic and leads to curse rather than blessing.

ii. **Galatians 5:6** "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."

Paul declares that what matters is "faith working through love" (*pistis di' agapēs energoumenē*). The participle "working" (*energoumenē*) indicates active, energetic expression—faith is never static or "by itself" but dynamically energized by love into deeds. This counters any notion of faith without works, aligning closely with James' verdict.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Inspired by Deuteronomy's command for open-hearted giving and Paul's vision of faith energized by love, integrate obedience into your daily routines—such as ethical business practices or family devotions that lead to service. For leaders, disciple others by example: demonstrate that faith isn't a private belief but a lived reality, equipping believers to impact society with transformative, action-oriented trust in God.

II. Faith Must Be Demonstrated by Works

A. The objector's attempt to separate faith and works

- I. The proposed division: you have faith and I have works
- II. The challenge issued: show me your faith without works

"But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'" (James 2:18)

The objector treats faith and works as separable spiritual specializations. The imperative "show me" (*deixon moi*) demands visible evidence. James accepts the challenge on its own terms to expose its impossibility.

B. The inherent impossibility of displaying faith apart from works

- I. **Faith as internal conviction requiring external evidence**
- II. **Works as the only visible proof of genuine faith**

Faith resides in the heart and mind; **it cannot be exhibited directly to another person except through the deeds it produces**. To demand proof of faith while forbidding the only means of proof is logically absurd. Works serve as the necessary and sufficient demonstration of the reality of faith.

a. **Application:** If someone watched your life for one week, would they see proof of your faith? Your neighbors, family, and coworkers should know you belong to Christ by your obedience, service, and love—not just by what you claim on Sunday.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **Proverbs 20:11** "It is by his deeds that a lad distinguishes himself If his conduct is pure and right."

The wisdom literature affirms that internal character ("conduct") is distinguished and proven by external "deeds." Even a child's character is judged not by what he claims, but by what he does. This reinforces James' argument that the invisible nature of the heart is made visible only through action.

ii. **Matthew 5:16** "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Jesus commands that discipleship be visible. The "light" is not an abstract philosophy but concrete "good works" that others can see. The purpose of this visibility is not self-promotion but the glorification of God. Invisible faith glorifies no one because it remains hidden; visible works testify to the power of God.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Just as a child is known by their actions and a lamp is known by its light, your identity in Christ is established by what you do. Do not hide your faith under a basket of inactivity. Let your workplace, your school, and your home see your good works so that the evidence of God's presence in your life is undeniable.

C. The demonic counterexample of belief without submission

- I. The acknowledgment of monotheism: you believe God is one
- II. The demons' superior response: they believe and shudder
- III. The rebuke: faith without works is useless

"You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?"
(James 2:19–20)

The Shema confession ("God is one") represents accurate doctrinal knowledge. James concedes its value ("you do well") before undercutting its sufficiency. **Demons possess not only intellectual assent but visceral terror ("shudder" = *phrissousin*, bristling in horror). Yet their belief produces rebellion, not submission.** "Useless" (*argē*) repeats the barrenness motif from verse 14—producing nothing toward salvation.

Truth: Accurate theological knowledge and emotional response to God, without submission in obedience, characterize demonic faith and cannot justify.

a. **Application:** You may know correct doctrine and feel strong emotion in worship, but if your life stays unchanged, your faith is no better than the demons'. True faith submits to every command of Christ, including baptism and daily obedience.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **Deuteronomy 6:4** "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

This is the *Shema*, the foundational confession of Jewish faith. James quotes this directly to show that while doctrinal precision is necessary, it is not sufficient. The demons know the *Shema* is true, yet they remain lost. Holding to the "old paths" and correct doctrine is vital, but without obedience, it is merely demonic orthodoxy.

ii. **Mark 1:23-24** "Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, 'What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!'"

The unclean spirit possessed perfect theological knowledge, identifying Jesus' humanity ("Nazareth"), His divinity ("Holy One of God"), and His authority ("destroy us"). Yet, this knowledge did not save the demon; it only solidified his condemnation. This proves that acknowledging Jesus as Lord without submitting to Him is the definition of a lost state.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Do not take comfort in merely knowing the Bible or winning arguments about doctrine. The devil knows the Bible better than we do. The difference between a demon and a disciple is not knowledge, but submission. Ensure your confession of "Jesus is Lord" is backed by a life that actually obeys His Lordship.

III. Faith Is Justified and Perfected by Works

A. Abraham's justification demonstrated in offering Isaac

- I. The historical act: offering up Isaac his son on the altar
- II. The question: was not Abraham justified by works in this

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" (James 2:21)

The event (Genesis 22) occurs decades after the initial reckoning of righteousness. James asks whether Abraham was justified "by works" in this specific act. The verb "justified" (*edikaiōthē*) here refers to vindication or demonstration of righteousness already reckoned.

a. **Application:** Don't rely on a past moment of faith. Your faith must be vindicated by your actions today. If you claim to be righteous, where is the evidence in your life right now?

b. Cross References from OT and NT:

i. **OT Cross Reference: Genesis 22:12** "He said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'"

God states, "Now I know." The internal faith of Abraham was made factual and concrete through the external act of raising the knife. It was the work of offering Isaac that provided the evidentiary proof of his fear of God.

ii. **NT Cross Reference: Hebrews 11:17** "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son."

The Hebrew writer clarifies that this work was an act *of faith*. It wasn't works *versus* faith; it was faith *in action*. The offering was the vehicle through which his faith functioned.

c. **Application from Cross References:** God often tests our faith to see if it is genuine. When God asks you to give up something you love—a habit, a relationship, or your time—do not hesitate. Your obedience in the difficult moments is the proof that you truly fear God.

B. The dynamic relationship between faith and works

- I. Faith working together with works

II. Faith perfected as a result of the works

"You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;" (James 2:22)

"Was working with" (*synērgēi*) is imperfect tense, indicating ongoing cooperation. Faith supplied motive and trust; works supplied execution. "Perfected" (*eteleiothe*) means brought to completion or maturity—faith reaches its intended goal only through obedience.

a. **Application:** Stop waiting to feel strong enough to obey. Obey first, and your faith will grow strong through the act. Whether it is forgiving, giving, or teaching your children the way of the Lord, act in obedience and watch faith mature.

b. Cross References from OT and NT:

i. **OT Cross Reference: Psalm 119:166** "I hope for Your salvation, O LORD, And do Your commandments."

The Psalmist links the internal hope of salvation directly with the external doing of commandments. These two cannot be divorced. Hope provides the anticipation; obedience provides the path.

ii. **NT Cross Reference: 1 Thessalonians 1:3** "constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,"

Paul uses the phrase "work of faith." Faith is a working principle. It is not a passive receipt of a gift, but an active labor. Just as love labors, faith works. If it does not work, it is not the faith Paul commended.

c. **Application from Cross References:** View your obedience as the gymnasium of your faith. Just as muscles atrophy without exercise, faith withers without works. Exercise your faith today by doing something difficult for the Kingdom.

C. The fulfillment of the earlier Scripture declaration

I. The reckoning of righteousness fulfilled through obedience

II. Abraham called the friend of God

"and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,' and he was called the FRIEND OF GOD." (James 2:23)

The Genesis 15:6 declaration is "fulfilled" (*ep̄lērothē*) by the Genesis 22 obedience. The initial reckoning is proven genuine and complete through the later act. "Friend of God" denotes covenant intimacy granted to those whose faith proves itself in obedience.

a. **Application:** We often think of "friendship with God" as a feeling. James defines it as a status earned through loyalty. Be loyal to God's commands, and you will know the closeness of His friendship.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **OT Cross Reference: 2 Chronicles 20:7** "Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever?"

Jehoshaphat appeals to the covenant relationship, identifying Abraham not just as a servant, but as a "friend" (*ahav* - one who loves). This title is reserved for those who share God's heart and will through obedience.

ii. **NT Cross Reference: John 15:14** "You are My friends if you do what I command you."

Jesus explicitly defines friendship with God in terms of obedience. He does not say, "You are my friends if you believe in me," but "if you *do* what I command." There is no friendship with Christ apart from doing His will.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Do you want to be a friend of God? It is not about a sentimental feeling; it is about alignment with His will. We show our love and friendship to the Lord by keeping His commandments.

D. The explicit theological conclusion

I. A man is justified by works and not by faith alone

"You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." (James 2:24)

This is the sole New Testament occurrence of "faith alone," and it is negated. Justification requires the kind of faith that inevitably produces works; passive, unaccompanied belief does not justify.

a. **Application:** Any teaching that says faith alone saves without obedience contradicts James. Hear, believe, repent, confess Christ, and be baptized for forgiveness of sins—then continue faithfully. Anything less leaves faith incomplete.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **OT Cross Reference: Exodus 19:5** "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine;"

The covenant has always been conditional. "If you will obey... then you shall be." God's grace provides the covenant, but man's obedient response is the condition for remaining in it.

ii. **NT Cross Reference: Romans 2:13** "for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified."

Paul, often pitted against James by false teachers, agrees perfectly here. Hearing the gospel is not enough; being a "doer" is what leads to justification. This aligns with the necessity of obedience (including baptism, Romans 6:3-4) for salvation.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Reject the modern comfort of "faith alone" theology. It is a doctrine of men, not God. Stand on the firm foundation that God requires an obedient response to His grace. Verify your salvation by your submission to the Gospel plan.

E. Rahab's parallel justification through obedient action

I. The act: receiving the messengers and sending them another way

II. The same principle: justified by works in the identical manner

"In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" (James 2:25)

Rahab, a Gentile outsider with a sinful past, is justified "in the same way" (*homoiōs*) as Abraham. Her works—harboring the spies and directing them to safety—constituted active allegiance to Israel's God at personal risk.

a. **Application:** Your past does not stop you. No matter what you have done, active faith in Christ can justify you today. Risk reputation, comfort, or relationships to stand with God's people. Saving faith chooses God's side openly.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **OT Cross Reference: Joshua 2:11** "When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath."

Rahab's work began with a confession of faith. She recognized God's supremacy. But had she only said these words and then handed the spies over to the King of Jericho, she would have perished. Her faith was validated because she acted on this knowledge.

ii. **NT Cross Reference: Hebrews 11:31** "By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace."

The contrast here is vital: she did not perish with the "disobedient." The opposite of faith is not "unbelief" intellectually, but "disobedience." Therefore, faith is synonymous with obedience.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Faith is the bridge that leads you out of the city of destruction. Rahab left her people and her past to join God's people. You must be willing to separate yourself from the world and its "disobedient" culture to be saved.

F. The concluding analogy of life and death

I. The body without the spirit is dead

II. Faith without works is likewise dead

*"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."
(James 2:26)*

The analogy reverses conventional expectation: works function as the animating spirit, giving life to the body of faith. Separation results in death. Faith without obedient works is a corpse—outward form devoid of vital power.

Truth: Obedient works complete and animate faith, just as the spirit gives life to the body; their separation renders faith dead and powerless to save.

a. **Application:** Do not let your faith become a lifeless body. Breathe life into it daily through obedience. This matters for your soul, your family, and the church. Live so your faith shows you are alive in Christ.

b. **Cross References from OT and NT:**

i. **OT Cross Reference: Genesis 2:7** "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Just as Adam was merely a form of dust until the spirit entered him, so "faith" is merely a form of words until obedience enters it. The structure is there, but the life is missing.

ii. **NT Cross Reference: Revelation 3:1** "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'"

Sardis had a reputation ("a name") for being a living church, likely full of activity and profession. But Jesus calls them "dead" because their deeds were not complete in the sight of God (v. 2). A reputation for faith without the reality of obedient works is spiritual death.

c. **Application from Cross References:** Is your faith a mannequin or a living man? A mannequin looks like a human but has no breath. Do not be a "mannequin Christian"—looking the part on Sunday but lacking the breath of active service during the week. Let the spirit of obedience animate everything you do.

Conclusion Scripture has spoken clearly through James, Abraham, and Rahab: faith that does not work is dead and cannot save. We are saved by grace through faith, but that faith is always active, obedient, and proven by works. Reject the lie that mental agreement or emotional feeling alone is enough. Become friends of God like Abraham by obeying Him fully. Examine your life today. If your faith has no works, it is dead. Make it alive now through obedience before the day of judgment comes.

Invitation The greatest work of faith is to obey the gospel call at the beginning. If you believe Jesus is the Son of God, do not leave that faith alone in your heart. Let it lead you to action. Repent of your sins and turn from the world. Confess Jesus as Lord before men. Be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

"Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" (Acts

In baptism your sins are washed away by the blood of Christ. If you have obeyed the gospel but your faith has grown cold and produces no works, repent now. Return to active service. Do not wait for judgment to learn your faith was dead. Obey today and live.

Greek Word Study

Scripture Index

Historical/Cultural Context

Further Study Recommendations
