

Faith Revealed by Works (Part 2 of #12)

James 2: 14-26

I want to continue our study of one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted passages in the Bible. This is likely one of the most debated passages in all the New Testament. Many are convinced this passage teaches justification through works, and thus a works based salvation.

I am convinced a thorough study of this passage in its context (looking at all of Chapter two and not just a few select verses) will reveal that James does not teach salvation by works, but rather works will always be present with genuine faith, complementing our faith. Any of us could build any type doctrine we desire if we were content to lift a few select verses out of their context and allow them to stand alone. If you feel as if you have found a contradiction in Scripture, you need to seek the Lord and do a more thorough study. The doctrines of the Bible are consistent throughout and there are no contradictions.

Let's take just a moment to review the outline we began last week.

I. The Examination of Faith (14-18)

A. The Mystery of Faith (14)

B. The Ministry of Faith (15-16)

1. Motivated by Sympathy (15)

2. Minimized through Apathy (16)

C. The Measure of Faith (17-18)

1. Faith is Accompanied by Works (17)

2. Faith is Apparent through Works (18)

II. The Expression of Faith (19-20)

A. Intellectual Faith (19a)

B. General Faith (19b)

C. Optimal Faith (20)

Now I would like to continue our consideration of the [certainties](#) disclosed in this particular passage as we think on: [Faith Revealed by Works](#). Next we discover:

III. The Evidence of Faith (21-26) – James uses two very familiar characters of the Old Testament to illustrate genuine faith. First we see:

A. The Patriarch of the Jews (21-24) – These verses examine significant moments in the life of Abraham and reveal the genuine faith he possessed in the Lord. Consider:

1. The Test of Faith (21) – [Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?](#) This is one of the verses that many have a hard time reconciling with the writings of Paul. Let's take a moment to consider the depth of what James has said and I believe we will understand it more clearly. As we begin we need to consider the many trials and tests of faith that Abraham endured in his life. The Jews were very familiar with the life of this man and the average Bible student is as well. We know that Abraham was called of God to leave the land of Ur of the Chaldees and follow Him to a land of which He would show Abraham. (That shows genuine faith on the part of Abraham.) We also know that God promised to raise up a great nation from Abraham, one without the ability to number. You are likely familiar with the lie Abraham told in Egypt regarding Sarah being his sister, literally doubting God's ability to keep him. We know how they conspired together for Abraham to go into Hagar in an effort to ensure God's promise on their own rather than being patient and waiting for God to send Isaac. This verse deals with the most significant moment in the life of Abraham: his offering of the promised son on Mount Moriah.

- I don't know how you interpret the life of Abraham, but I see a life lived by faith in God rather than life lived trusting in works. We may tend to be a bit critical of Abraham at times because of his lack of faith, but I am sure that we would have likely responded much the same. Take just a moment to consider the works that Abraham performed. One of the greatest examples is the grand idea to circumvent the timing and will of God for a son in the conspiracy and birth of Ishmael. That is a work that ended in failure regarding the plan of God. I see no way to arrive at the conclusion that Abraham was justified through his works. (We will see the extent of his genuine faith in a moment, but it appears if he was depending on works, he had failed miserably.)
- When considering this verse, inevitably the question will arise regarding justification. [Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?](#) Many will say: it's right there in the text! We must take the time to consider the meaning of the word justified. Without getting too complicated, I would like to point out that this rendering of the word does not imply being justified through works or self-righteousness. The verb in the passive voice, as it is here, implies that somebody from without, other than Abraham, declared him justified. The Righteous Judge declared Abraham righteous; it was not achieved through personal works or self-righteousness. We will see this more clearly as we consider the next point:

2. The Triumph of Faith (22) – [Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?](#) James clearly points out the relationship of faith and works. Genuine faith produces works and is often revealed by works. Consider a summary of this account in Scripture.

▪ Abraham and Sarah had prayed, longed, and waited for the promised son. They were both well beyond child bearing years when Isaac was born. Can you imagine how Abraham must've felt when God came to him and shared the news that he wanted Abraham to offer the promised son on the altar of sacrifice? As the story unfolds we see an obedient father who walked by faith in God. He made preparations for the sacrifice, taking the wood and fire with them as they began the journey. As they made it to the foot of the mountain, he instructed the servants to remain behind as he and Isaac were going up to the mountain to worship. As they traveled up the mountain, Isaac was thinking as well. He knew they had the wood and the fire to offer the sacrifice, but there was no sacrifice to offer. He questioned his father and Abraham responded that God would provide Himself a sacrifice. (Once again we see genuine faith.) When they reached the top of the mountain, Abraham was obedient to the will of God, and as he prepared to offer his son, God stopped him and revealed the ram caught in the thicket. God saw the faith Abraham had and was pleased with his faith. His works revealed his faith, but it was faith that pleased God. [Heb.11:17-19](#) – **By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, [18] Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: [19] Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.** Abraham had enough faith to believe that even if he offered Isaac as a sacrifice, God would raise him from the dead because he was the promised son! (That is genuine faith!)

3. The Testimony of Faith (23) – [And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.](#) The obedience of Abraham and the faithfulness of God was a fulfillment of Scripture. It is very interesting when we consider the passage that James quotes here. [Gen.15:5-6](#) – [And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. \[6\] And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.](#) This encounter with the Lord took place some fifteen years before the birth of Isaac. Abraham was counted righteous in the eyes of God because he believed in Him. Abraham possessed faith in the Lord long before that faith was revealed on Mount Moriah. His obedience to the will of God, even though it was painful, revealed a genuine faith he had possessed for many, many years.

▪ Clearly we see that faith was present in the heart before it was manifested in works. Our works will never reveal faith if faith isn't already present. If we possess genuine faith in Christ, our works will eventually reveal our faith.

▪ Also we see that Abraham's faith and obedience brought a distinction that few enjoyed. He was called the friend of God. The Lord recognized Abraham's faithfulness and desire to fellowship with God at any cost, and He counted him a friend.

4. The Totality of Faith (24) – [Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.](#)

Yet again we find a verse that is often hard to be received, but we must consider it in its context. This verse is directly tied to all that we have just considered in the life of Abraham. James is simply concluding his thoughts on the life of this giant of faith. Abraham possessed genuine faith in the Lord. It is one thing to say we believe and trust God, but it is something else all together to prove our trust in Him as we act on our faith. The entire account on Mount Moriah was motivated by faith. Abraham wasn't hoping God would justify him if he carried out some rash request. He was willing to offer his son, possessing enough faith in God to raise Isaac from the dead.

▪ This is just another reminder of the relationship of faith and works. Genuine faith will produce works consistent with such faith. Faith is not born of works; works are born of faith. *We must not forget that the subject of James is faith that works, not works without faith. A hand cannot move by itself; there must be a heart that moves it. A man cannot have works, the works of which James speaks, without faith. The lesson which James wishes to teach us here is that our works of faith give God many opportunities subsequent to our new birth, to our regeneration, to declare us righteous before Him and before our fellowmen... What a wonderful thought is hidden here, that the more we obey God, the more we perform His works, the more verdicts of our justification we shall hear from Him.*ⁱ

B. The Prostitute of Jericho (25) – [Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?](#) Now James presents the faith of another character with whom the Jews would have been familiar. Consider:

1. Her Occupation – We are familiar with this story as well. When the spies entered Jericho they lodged in the house of Rahab the harlot. She was a woman of the night, one who sold her body for financial gain. Clearly her works were not consistent with righteousness. She seems an unlikely candidate for justification on any grounds. As we will see in a moment though, her works changed after an encounter with faith.

2. Her Conviction – As the spies came to Jericho, she received them into her home. As we read the passage in [Joshua 2: 1-21](#), we find her conversation with the men. She revealed how the people of Jericho had heard of the mighty acts of God. She realized that He was the true and living God. She knew that His hand was upon Israel. Rahab realized if she was to be saved, she too must trust in the Lord by faith. She could have easily revealed the spies to those who came looking for them, but she realized her need and wanted to know the God they served. Conviction gripped her heart as she looked through eyes of faith. She was concerned with her well being and that of her family as well. Faith in God motivated Rahab to action.

3. Her Participation – Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? Take just a moment to consider the works of Rahab prior to her confession of faith in Jehovah. She was a prostitute, indulging the flesh for worldly gain. Her works were not consistent with faith in the Lord. By faith, her works changed dramatically. It would have been easy for her to have revealed the men and discounted their God. She likely had a lucrative business in Jericho and must've realized she would have to seek a new line of work. Faith created works that were much different than her previous works. When her heart changed so too did her works. Faith generated works that resulted in her physical redemption when Israel conquered Jericho. [Heb.11:31 – By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace.](#)

Conclusion: [James 2:26 – For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.](#) James concludes this powerful chapter with a stirring reminder. Once the spirit leaves the body, all that remains is a corpse that will rot and decay. It can do nothing beyond that. It is just an empty shell, one that is lifeless. So it is with our faith. We can talk about faith all we want, but the life of our relationship with Christ, genuine faith, will motivate works. A faith that is living will produce works consistent with faith.

I want to emphasize again that works do not and cannot save. Salvation is achieved by grace through faith in the Lord. However, those who possess genuine faith will also produce works that glorify the Lord. Works stand as a testimony of faith.

Many are not producing works because they lack genuine faith. A lost man may do good deeds, but his works will eventually reveal the nature of his heart. A Christian may fail once in a while, but there will be some fruit of their faith revealed through works. The key is a personal relationship with Christ through faith.

¹ Faith, Love & Hope: An Exposition of the Epistle of James.