



CAPITOL COMMISSION

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COLORADO

James 2:21 A Living Faith, Part 1

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In James 2:14-26, the writer compares the difference between two types of faith; a dead faith and a living faith. James makes it clear that a true, living faith must be accompanied with action. If there is no action, it is a dead faith. The absence of good works indicates the absence of saving faith as evidenced by a changed life. The question James asks is; are you willing to evaluate your faith to see if it is false and dead or true and living? True faith is evidenced by righteous deeds not empty claims. Jesus said in Matthew 7:19, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." There can be no doubt about the gravity of James' warning. Faith without works is powerless to save, vain and useless. Are you willing to recognize and evaluate your standing before God? It is a matter of eternal life or eternal death. Our study today will focus on a true and living faith as we continue in James 2.

I. TRUE FAITH WORKS - JAMES 2:14-26

"(14)What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (15)If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, (16)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? (17)Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (18)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." (19)You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. (20)But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? (21)Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? (22)You see that faith was working with his works, and a result of the works, faith was perfected; (23)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. (24)You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. (25)And 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? (26)For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." James 2:14-26

II. A LIVING FAITH: ABRAHAM - JAMES 2:21, PART 1

A true, living faith is evidenced by righteous deeds and an obedience to God's will. But, as we have seen so far, a dead faith is characterized with empty claims. It is possible to go through the motions of faith without any true change. Faith without works is useless because it demonstrates a dead, lifeless faith that cannot save. This message is so important in our world today for many would say they are Christians but theirs is a dead faith, powerless to save. However, in these next verses, we will see how a living faith is contrasted with a dead faith. James gives us several examples beginning with Abraham, challenging the genuineness of our confession.

A. ABRAHAM JUSTIFIED – JAMES 2:21

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

James uses perhaps the greatest example from the life of Abraham. Abraham's example would carry great weight and bring clarity for he was the father of all Jews and from Romans 4:1, we see that Abraham is viewed as the spiritual father of all believers. James begins by asking a rhetorical question suggesting that Abraham was justified by works. Is James now contradicting the teaching of Scripture that says we are justified by faith in saying that Abraham is justified by works? Keep in mind that James also wrote in James 1:17-18 that salvation is a gracious gift that we could never earn. Is he saying something different now a few verses later? Does salvation come as a result of works? Was it Abraham's works that saved him or was it his works that clearly revealed his true and living faith? Let's see.

1. PAUL'S TEACHING: JUSTIFIED BY FAITH- ROM. 4, GEN. 15

Is there an apparent contradiction between James' statement of Abraham, "justifies by works" (James 2:21) and Paul's teaching from Romans 4:3 that "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"? Can we obtain salvation from our works? Both James and Paul used examples from Abraham's life. Paul uses the word "justified" to refer to the position of a believer where they are declared righteous. Only through this righteousness, could we have a right standing before the God of the universe.

"justified" Greek word "*dikaioo*," refers to being declared righteous, set forth as righteous, justify as a judicial act, primarily by faith.

This justification does not mean that we haven't sinned, but rather that God has credited righteousness to our account, not because we deserve it, but through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul shows in Romans 3:21-25, that we are justified, declared righteous through God's grace, on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ. Grace is receiving something we could never deserve. Because we are sinners, we could never be righteous. But through repentance and then faith in Jesus Christ, we receive what we could not do for ourselves...obtain a righteous standing before God.

A. ABRAHAM DECLARED RIGHTEOUS- ROMANS 4:1-3

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh; has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Romans 4:1-3

Paul specifically states there is no way to obtain salvation by performing good works and refers to the legal term of being declared righteous based on Christ’s atoning work on the cross. Salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. We cannot earn salvation by anything we do. Paul points to a specific time in Abraham’s life where he was declared righteous in Gen. 15.

B. ABRAHAM DECLARED RIGHTEOUS - GENESIS 15:6

“Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Genesis 15:6

Paul points to a specific event in Abraham’s life where God makes a covenant with Abraham, known as the Abrahamic Covenant. There God promised him a son from whom a great nation would come. From that nation, God would provide the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. It is here that Abraham’s salvation is recorded for all as God credits his account with righteousness, declaring him to be righteous on the basis of faith in Him. Abraham is declared righteous not because he is righteous, but because God credited his account with a righteousness found only from God. This is what Paul speaks of in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. Justification is simply by faith; trusting and relying on salvation from God alone. So what is James trying to say in James 2:21?

2. JAMES’ TEACHING: JUSTIFIED BY WORKS- JAMES 2:21

So if Paul says there is no way one can be justified by works, how in the world can James contradict Paul? Well, he doesn’t and let’s examine why.

A. ABRAHAM DEMONSTRATED RIGHTEOUS- JAMES 2:21

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?” James 2:21

“justified” Greek word **“edikaiothe,”** speaks of being declared righteous primarily by faith, but subsequently by evidenced works.

This word *“justified”* may also be used in the sense to vindicate or to show to be righteous. In other words, James would be referring to the obedient works that demonstrate, that show a true faith as evidenced by Abraham’s life. James isn’t pointing to the legal term and action of being declared

righteous, rather, he points to the divine vindication of the righteous nature and character manifest by the deeds flowing from his faith.¹

So James teaches that justification (salvation) is simply by faith, but it is the kind of faith that manifests, shows itself in active obedience, good works. Again, as John Calvin said, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” Saving faith is the faith that throws its’ whole life into living out the truth believed.²

B. ABRAHAM DEMONSTRATED RIGHTEOUS- GENESIS 22

While Paul pointed to Genesis 15 as an illustration of Abraham’s salvation or justification by faith, James clearly points to a different event from Abraham’s life to illustrate his point that Abraham was *“justified by works”*. The specific deed James refers to is found in Genesis 22 which records perhaps the greatest example of faith in the life of Abraham. It takes place many years after Genesis 15. There God asks Abraham to offer Isaac, his only son as a sacrifice. How could God ask this of Abraham for Isaac was the fulfillment of the prophecy given years prior in Genesis 15? Isaac was Abraham’s only son whom he loved. To obey God would be a costly act of obedience and trust for Abraham. But Abraham obeyed, trusting that God would raise Isaac even from the dead in order to fulfill His great promise as Hebrews 11:17-19 reveals for us. In Genesis 22:12, God responds to Abraham’s obedience by saying, *“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 confirmed Abraham’s faith as authentic based on the demonstration of obedience that flowed from his life.

Scripture records no further testing of Abraham’s faith after this supreme act of obedience and trust. It demonstrated who was first in Abraham’s life and this is the example James uses to illustrate the kind of obedient works that result from a true and genuine faith. James isn’t pointing to the legal act of being declared righteous. The genuineness of Abraham’s faith was proven, was shown and demonstrated by the complete obedience he gave to God.

3. COMPLIMENTS NOT CONTRADICTS- JAMES 2:21

So, James is not contradicting what Paul taught. Abraham was justified by faith alone, just as Paul said. But then Abraham’s true and genuine faith was demonstrated by his good works. This work didn’t earn Abraham’s justification but this was a fruit and outward evidence of his faith. Salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and in this newness of life we are set free to do His will alone! (Ephesians 2:10) Are you?

¹ Hiebert, E. Edmond, James. Moody bible Institute: Chicago, Illinois, 1992. Pg. 171.

² Dever, Mark, The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept. Good News Publishers: Wheaton, Illinois, 2005. Pg. 434