



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Faith That Saves, Faith That Doesn't – Pt. 2 (James 2:20-26)

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In Part One of this study, we discussed the following: 1) The essential question is, "If you say you follow Christ but don't have good works to back up that claim, have you exercised saving faith?" 2) There is an emptiness of words when we tell a needy person to have a great day, but do nothing to meet their needs. 3) True Christianity is an exclusive salvation. In other words, not everyone who knows about God, or even believes certain things about God will be saved. Even the demons believe God and shudder.

Our text this week takes us further into the nature of true saving faith.

James 2:20-26 - Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God.²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

I. EXAMPLES FROM OLD TESTAMENT (2:20-25)

James continues his strong argument that true saving faith results in good deeds by bringing up two vivid Old Testament illustrations that help prove his point. It's interesting that he chose Abraham and Rahab, because he had many excellent examples at his disposal. As he was inspired by the Lord to write this, however, these were the characters that embodied what he wanted to emphasize.

This passage has been misused and misunderstood by many. Some would even say that it contradicts other Scriptures. But there is a clear explanation which is not only understandable, but complementary to other passages.

The issue is with James' wording that Abraham and Rahab were "justified by works" (vv. 21, 24, 25). For some, this phrase directly violates verses that supposedly say the very opposite thing.

Ephesians 2:8, 9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Titus 3:4-7 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Romans 3:23, 24, 28 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ...For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

You can see the potential theological dilemma. But God's Word does not contradict itself; it **explains** itself more fully by comparing Scripture with Scripture. No one passage can be lifted out of the context of the whole and interpreted on its own. So we know there is agreement between James and Paul (who wrote the passages just cited).

The verses from Ephesians, Titus and Romans are crystal clear and are repeated in multiple places in the Bible. The plain teaching of Scripture is that salvation is by faith alone by grace alone. No amount of good deeds could ever merit our salvation. We simply would never measure up.

ALL OF US HAVE BECOME LIKE ONE WHO IS UNCLEAN, AND ALL OUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS ARE LIKE FILTHY RAGS.

ISAIAH 64:6

So, how are we to understand what James means here? Here are three reasons James is teaching that Abraham was justified by faith alone and his works simply reflected that reality.

- 1) In chapter one, James called salvation a gift.

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James 1:17, 18 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

James is referencing salvation when he says, “He brought us forth by the word of truth”. That had nothing to do with our works. In fact, the whole idea behind a gift is that it is something that is not earned, only accepted.

- 2) James quotes Genesis 15:6, which is another proof of the nature of salvation. This verse (2:23) emphasizes the need for trust that is put in God and His word. In Abraham’s case, he believed what God had told him about future promises – that he would make a great nation from him, that he would give him a homeland and that the world would be blessed through him.
- 3) The deed that James relates from Abraham’s life was the day he followed God’s voice to offer his son, Isaac, on an altar. This was the child that God had promised Abraham would father the new nation we know as Israel. Hebrews 11 amplifies this story for us.

Hebrews 11:17-19 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

The timing of this act of belief is the key, though. This was at least twenty years after God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 15. In other words, we’re told that Abraham **believed** God and **that** was the basis for his justification, **not** the obedience of almost offering Isaac which occurred over twenty years later. The obedience proved the faith was real, but it wasn’t the foundation of Abraham’s acceptance before God.

The story of Rahab underscores the same point. As the children of Israel entered the land promised to them, she hid spies from Israel, helped them escape and she and her family were spared during the battle of Jericho. James does not condone her profession, but makes clear that she trusted God and had saving faith.

II. EVIDENCE OF WORKS (2:26)

James gets in one more helpful illustration in the last verse of the chapter. A body with no spirit is obviously dead. The body cannot move, desire, act or decide anything. In the same way, the person who claims to have faith but has no discernable fruit of good deeds and a heart to know and please God is still spiritually dead. Whatever faith he claims to have has not saved him. This brings us full circle and answers the question in the first verse of the passage – “...if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (2:14). Absolutely not!

III. ENDING THOUGHTS

It may be that you belong to a faith tradition that teaches that you must live a good life to be acceptable to God, that you must earn justification. Obviously, that’s not what has been taught in this lesson, but I still hope we are friends! I would ask that you carefully and prayerfully read the verses contained in this study. They are not my words or my opinions. All we’re trying to do here is let God’s word speak to us.

The gospel is Good News. The fact that salvation is presented as a gift of grace that can only be accepted through faith is tremendous news! There is no wondering if we’re good enough and no fear that we won’t measure up. We never could. But Jesus lived the perfect life, died sacrificially for us so that the righteous price could be paid. Now, anyone who believes on him through faith, trusting in him only for their salvation will be saved. And the point of this paragraph in James 2 is that good deeds will naturally flow out of a life that is given to God and his ways.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

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