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Faith and Works James 2:14-26 Part Four

If I were to ask you what does “justified” mean? How would you respond? I believe that most people who are familiar with the Scriptures would say, “Justified means that we have been declared righteous by God.” It is as if from God’s perspective we had never sinned.

On what basis can God do this? **Rom. 3:24** tells us that we have been justified or declared righteous as a **“gift of God’s grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”** Therefore being “justified” has nothing to do with our works. If it did, then our justification would have nothing to do with grace. Then the question that we must ask is this, “How can we receive this grace?” We receive this grace through faith. Listen to the words of **Romans 3:28, “For we maintain that a man is justified (by what?) by faith apart from the works of the law.”**

Hopefully, each one of us here this weekend will rejoice in this very simple but basic truth, because if this were not true then we would all be condemned as sinners. But if it is true that we have in fact been declared righteous on the basis of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, then we are saved.

Now having said this, we come to a passage this morning that presents to us a problem. The passage that we will be considering is **James 2:21-26**. Look at the very first verse in this section of Scripture, **V. 21, “Was not Abraham our Father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”** Based on what we have said this morning concerning the doctrine of justification, it might be a surprise to find James saying **“Was not Abraham our Father justified by works”** rather than saying **“Was not Abraham our father justified by faith.”**

This statement was a serious stumbling block to Martin Luther. He was adamantly opposed to the Roman Catholic dogma of salvation through works, and so strong a defender of the truth of salvation by grace through faith alone that he called the Epistle of James “an epistle of straw.” Certainly the church of Jesus Christ owes a great debt to Martin Luther as a defender of the true gospel. But, I believe that Martin Luther never fully understood what James meant by the words that he chose. And lest we also become confused, we need to examine the word translated “justified” in **V. 21** more closely.

The verb (DIKAI00) which is translated “justified” has two general meanings: (1) “to acquit, to pronounce or to declare as righteous.” That is the sense in which Paul almost always uses this term which we have already discovered in **Rom.3:24-28**. and which forms the basis of what we call the Doctrine of Justification. But there is a second general meaning. It can also be defined as (2) “to vindicate, or to prove righteous.” It is used in that sense a number of times in the New Testament, in relation to God as well as men (Luke 7:35; Rom. 3:4; 1 Tim. 3:16).

Because this word has two basic general meanings, we can then choose what best fits the context. And what best fits the context clearly is the second general meaning. James is not outlining in His epistle the means of salvation, which of course is living, saving faith. But rather he is outlining in his epistle the outflow of true salvation, which is the works of faith.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

With this in mind, we could paraphrase **V. 21** and read it this way, **“Was not Abraham our Father proved to be righteous by works?”** Now, hopefully having clarified this, let us read the passage that we will be considering this morning.

Let us read **James 2:21-26**, **“Was not Abraham our Father justified or proven to be righteous by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 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. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 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? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”**

I hope that the study of this passage this morning will again reaffirm to us the importance of living a life that is consistent with our profession, the importance of living a life that leaves no question as to whether we are a follower of Christ versus just being a nice person.

How does this passage fit in with what we have already studied? The theme of this epistle is “Tests of a Living Faith.” The first test that we considered was the “Response to Trials test.” The second test that we considered was the “Response to the Word test.” The third test was the “Impartiality test.” And the fourth test which we are now considering is the “Works test.” And we find this test in **VV. 14-26**.

In order to make his point concerning the importance of works in the life of the redeemed, James in these verses contrasts “dead faith” with “living faith.” In **VV. 14-20**, he describes “dead faith” as being characterized by an “empty confession” in **V. 14**, a “false compassion” in **VV. 15-17** and finally a “shallow conviction” in **VV. 18-19**. After describing “dead faith” in **VV. 14-20** James now turns to highlight “living faith” by giving us living illustrations. And his first living illustration is Abraham.

Abraham

Listen to the words of **James 2:21-24**, **“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 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. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”** Certainly no one could accuse Abraham of having an “empty confession” or a “false compassion” or a “shallow conviction.” His life was the complete opposite of what was described in **VV.14-20**. His life was full of works of faith. And there is no more dramatic work of faith in the life of Abraham than the incident that James records for us in **V.21**.

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Look at the very first phrase, **“Was not Abraham our Father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”** I am sure most of you are familiar with this story. In **Gen. 22:1** it says, **“Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” (2) And He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.”** How did Abraham respond to God’s direction?

He in fact made preparations to obey what he believed God had directed him to do. Abraham had a genuine, living, saving faith. Although God’s command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac his son threatened to abrogate, to cancel God’s promise of blessing through Isaac and also contradicted what Abraham knew to be God’s prohibition of human sacrifice, the patriarch trusted God completely. His faith in God drove him toward unquestioning and unwavering obedience.

Gen. 22:3 tells us, **“Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.”** We do not know all that went through Abraham’s mind at the time, but he told the young men who accompanied them, **“Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.”** Abraham knew that regardless of what happened on Mount Moriah, both he and Isaac would return alive. Although no such thing had ever happened before, he knew that, if necessary, God according to **Heb. 11:9** could raise Isaac **“even from the dead.”** A living faith trusts God and His word and will therefore produce the works that are consistent with that faith, even if it is costly and will thereby prove itself to be genuine. This is why James says in **V. 21** **“Was not Abraham our father justified by works.”** To help us understand that what I have just shared with you about living faith is in fact true, we can go to **V. 22.**

“You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected.” This statement implies that Abraham possessed a faith prior to the incident with Isaac in **V. 21** which was somehow “imperfect.” But we should not conclude that his faith was “imperfect” in the sense that God had not declared him righteous. Either our faith is saving, or it is not saving. There are not degrees of saving faith. Certainly Abraham, as we will clearly see in **Gen. 15:6**, had already been saved long before the events described by James in **VV.21-22**. Again the key to understanding what James is saying is by understanding the words that he is using. The verb “perfected” (ETELEIOTHE) means basically “to bring to an end, to bring to its goal.” Men either believe in a saving way or they do not. If they believe in a saving way then their lives will bear fruit consistent with that profession and when they do then their faith has been perfected or, in other words, their faith arrives at its goal. And this is exactly what we will see in the next verse.

V. 23 says, **“and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness.....”** The passage that James quotes in this verse is from **Gen. 15:6**. It was not in **Gen. 22** that Abraham had exercised saving faith. It was much earlier than this which is clear from **Gen. 15:6** How is **Gen. 22** a fulfillment of **Gen. 15:6**? “Fulfilled” clearly does not refer to a fulfillment of prophecy but rather to fulfillment of the principle that justification by faith results in justification by works. They are tied together. What began in **Gen. 15** is perfected, completed, and realized in **Gen. 22.**

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

In **Gen. 15** God had told Abraham that he would have a son, even though Abraham and his wife Sarah were far too old from a human standpoint to have children. But Abraham believed God, and we are told that God reckoned it to him as righteousness. And that faith in God and that promise was given an ultimate test in **Gen. 22** when God directed him to kill his son. And in his willingness to obey, God even original saving faith was proven and he was righteous and therefore justified by works in the sense of having his faith vindicated. Thus, by what he did, by his works, his faith was made complete or was perfected, brought to its intended goal, and therefore fulfilled the principle that justification by faith results in justification by works.

What does James believe and what is he teaching in these verses that we have considered up to this point this morning? James believes that faith justifies, but not a “faith” that remains alone and produces no works. James rejects it as not being true faith. He demands a working faith. This is why he concludes the illustration of the life of Abraham with the statement that he does in **V. 24** **“You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”**

True faith always boils down to obedience. This was true in the time of Abraham and it continues to be true today. There is a song entitled “Trust and Obey,”

“When we walk with the Lord in the light of His word, what a glory He sheds on our way. While we do His good will, He abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey. Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at his feet or we’ll walk by His side in the way; what He says we will do, where He sends we will go, never fear, only trust and obey.”

Are you seeing your faith perfected? Are you realizing the goal of your faith? Are you seeing obedience being worked out in your life? Think on this for a moment. Has not God said, “meditate on the law day and night?” Are you striving to be obedient in this area? Has not God said, “pray without ceasing”? Are you striving to be obedient in this area? Has not God said, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Are you striving to be obedient in this area? Has not God called us to confess Him before men? Are you striving to be obedient in this area? Sometimes trusting in the Lord, the pursuit of obedience will cost us very little and at other times it might cost us all that we have.

I am sure that you have all heard about the school massacre in Littleton. But some of you may not be aware of one young girl who died in that massacre named Cassie Bernall. Why was she selected as a target? She was selected as a target because she chose to answer the killer’s question, “Do you believe in God?” and she answered that question with a simple “Yes!”

As a young teenager she had become involved in drugs, tinkered with witchcraft, and glorified violence. But all of this, according to her parents, had changed very dramatically after she by faith accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She told her mom and dad that she had changed and that she would prove it. And she proceeded to do exactly that, not only by the way she lived but by the way she died. Just as Abraham’s faith was perfected when he was willing to offer up his son, Cassie’s faith was also perfected when she offered up her life.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Certainly neither we, nor our faith, has to be perfect. Abraham was not a perfect man, either in his faith or in his works. But James's point is that, in the overall pattern of his life Abraham demonstrated himself through the works of faith to be a man possessing genuine, living, saving faith. And hopefully we will be able to look at our own lives and see the same thing. The second living illustration of living faith is Rahab the harlot in VV. 25-26.

Rahab

Let us read VV. 25-26, **“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? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”**

Rahab stands in stark contrast to Abraham. She was a woman, a Gentile, and a prostitute. Abraham was a moral man; she was an immoral woman. He was a noble Chaldean; she was a degraded Canaanite. He was a great leader; she was a common citizen. He was at the top of the social-economic order; she was at the bottom. Yet Rahab the harlot is listed along with Abraham in the great gallery of the faith in Heb. 11 and was even in the human lineage of Jesus, being the great-grandmother of David which is clear from **Matt. 1:5**. How did such blessings come to her?

Joshua 2 tells us that Rahab was an innkeeper in Jericho. When Joshua sent two men into the city to spy it out, her inn was a logical place to go because it was on the city wall and did not require venturing far into the city. When the king of Jericho heard of their presence, he sent officials to Rahab's house to arrest them, but she falsely reported that the spies had left the city just before dark and suggested that soldiers be sent to capture them. She had hidden the two men behind stacks of flax on her roof. Why did she do this? After these city officials left her inn, she explains it to the two spies in Joshua 2:9-12, **“I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. 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. Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth.**

Like Abraham, Rahab was not perfect. Her profession was despicable and her lying was sinful. She was not honored by the Lord for either. She had been born into and been raised in a wicked pagan society that the Lord was about to destroy, in which lying and all sorts of gross sin were the norm. But when she had opportunity to demonstrate her trust in the Lord, she placed her life on the line. Had her actions been discovered by the king, she and her family would have been summarily executed for treason. In His boundless grace, God accepted her trust in Him and her service to Him, rescued her family, and used her for his own divine purposes, causing her to become a model of faith and an ancestor of the Messiah.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

As with Abraham and every other true believer, imputed righteousness based on faith resulted in practical righteousness reflected in good works. Rahab's outward life of faithfulness manifested her inner life of faith.

CONCLUSION

Abraham and Rahab were not proven to be righteous, or in other words justified by works, by a mere profession of faith, their attendance at a worship service or any other religious activity. In both cases it was demonstrated by putting everything that was dear to them on the line for the Lord, entrusting it to Him without qualification or reservation. They were supremely committed to the Lord, whatever the cost. It is in this kind of crucible, when our ambitions, hopes, dreams, destinies, and life itself are at stake - where true faith unfailingly reveals itself. It is during crunch time!

It is also in that same crucible that false, deceitful faith reveals itself. Look at **V. 26, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."** When push comes to shove, when something really important is on the line, we have a great opportunity facing ourselves. Hopefully we will pass the test. If you have this weekend recognized that you have a so-called faith that only goes so far, and when it really gets down to the nitty gritty you consistently cave in. If you have come to realize that your faith is dead and you want that to change, then I would encourage you to do the following:

Recognize that you are a sinner and cannot save yourself.

Recognize that you could not do what Christ did for you in His death, burial, and resurrection.

And therefore on the basis of these facts, will you now by faith turn from going your own way and embrace Jesus as your Lord and Savior, committing yourself to be the person God would have you to be and to do the things God would have you to do? No matter what. If you do this sincerely, you will have exercised saving faith.

This evening hopefully every single person who is here is in fact alive, not physically but spiritually. Hopefully every single person who is here this evening knows that they in fact possess saving faith. And with this knowledge let us celebrate the death of the one who has made this all possible.