

Sermon for Sunday, August 7, 2010
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Justified by a Faith that Works
James 2:20-26

20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. 25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Our theme is justification. James 2:24 says, "A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." Let's explore that, starting with an illustration. A month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, U.S. forces launched an air attack against the Taliban, who held power in Afghanistan. They sponsored the 9/11 attacks and brutalized their own people. American forces had encouraged anti-Taliban Afghans on the ground, but the Taliban had tanks, so they made little progress.

After a few weeks, U.S. soldiers began to land behind enemy lines. They helped friendly Afghan forces organize and call for air support against Taliban forces. One day, an F-15 armed with precision-guided bombs got a call from the ground, from a group of Americans and "good" Afghans as they took shells from a line of Taliban tanks. The F-15 was cruising at 20,000 feet, with thick clouds hiding high mountain peaks below them, making it impossible to see the tanks beneath them.

Flying blind, the plane had to release their weapons and let spotters on the ground pick them up and guide them to the tanks. The military spent millions of dollars for such goals. Would it work? The first bomb fell and blew up the lead Taliban tank. Minutes later, a second bomb shot through the clouds and destroyed a second tank. Then a third and a fourth. With their tanks gone, the Taliban scattered. How could they fight a foe that rained weapons through clouds and darkness?

In James' terms we could describe the air strikes this way:

- The success of the bombers **justified** our confidence in our armaments.
- The success **justified** the strategy of waging a campaign through the air.
- Earlier, engineers proposing these military systems had to **justify** their project to Pentagon leaders and Congress. The system was justified by its works.

James 2:24 says, "A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. *Justified by deeds* doesn't sound right to evangelical Christians. Apostle Paul says, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom 3:28, English Standard Version (ESV)). Yet James says, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (2:24, ESV). What does James have in mind?

James is leading us on a quest for true religion. Orthodox words are not enough. True religion works. It hears the law and obeys. It helps widows and orphans in their distress. False religion offers kind wishes, not action (2:15-17).

False religion knows Christian creeds and takes religion classes in a university. True religion seeks and knows God himself. It studies Scripture to hear God's voice. False religion knows Christianity, but not Jesus. James contrasts true and false faith in four cases.

- Case #1: Faith without deeds of compassion for a needy brother is dead. It does no good to our neighbor (2:15-17).
- Case #2: False religion is also useless with God. Demons believe God is one, but they shudder in fear (2:18-20).
- Case #3: But true faith brings God's blessing. Abraham proved his faith was alive and he was justified when he offered his son on the altar (2:21-24).
- Case #4: Rahab proved that real faith blesses our fellow man. She proved her faith was real when she risked all to care for Israel's scouts or spies (2:25-26).

We examined the first two scenes last week; Abraham and Rahab remain.

The case of difficult obedience shows true faith is useful Godward 2:20-24

James says "Faith without deeds is useless" because it offers no help to neighbors who need daily food and clothing (2:20). By contrast, Abraham proved his faith was real; God counted him righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar (2:21). The lively faith of Abraham contrasts with the inertia of false faith. When Abraham believed God it led to wondrous works.

You recall Abraham's story. Long he and Sarah awaited a son. Through this son God's covenant family would grow, become a nation, and bless the world. God promised Abraham a child when he was seventy-five years old and Sarah sixty-five. People then lived longer and stayed younger then (120 years). So there was still a slim chance that Abraham and Sarah might have a child of their own.

But time passed; slim chances dwindled to none. Ten years after the promise, God told Abraham: "I am your shield and your great reward." Abraham retorted, in essence, "If you are my great reward, why am I still waiting for a son?" (15:1-2).

God took Abraham outside his tent and said, "Look at the stars. So shall your offspring be." City folk must forget their sky clouded by pollution and street lights. We may see perhaps one hundred stars at night; on closer inspection, five are planes and one a weather satellite. But in the clear desert air, Abraham beheld a dazzling celestial host. He looked and believed God would give him descendants like these and God "counted it to him as righteousness" (15:6).

Still, Abraham waited twenty-five years before Sarah birthed his son Isaac. Abraham was one hundred and Sarah, ninety. The boy grew. When Isaac was a lad, perhaps forty years after the initial promise, God asked Abraham to sacrifice that son to him (22:2). He was Abraham's only son, the child of the promise.

Yet Abraham obeyed God. He bound his son, laid him on a stone altar, and raised a knife in dreadful obedience. How could he do it? Genesis offers a tantalizing clue. Abraham tells his servants to wait while he and Isaac travel on and promises, "we will return to you." Hebrews says Abraham believed that if necessary, God would raise Isaac from dead (Heb 11:19) – and he acted on it.

Now all knew that Abraham's faith was real. God says, "Now I know you fear God" (22:12). James says Abraham was considered righteous for what he did. He even dares to say Abraham's faith was "made complete by what he did" (Jas 2:21-22).

Justified by works?

Faith completed by works? What does that mean? James 2:24 is even more striking: "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone". "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (ESV 2:24). For Christians "raised" on Paul, this is astonishing. How can James say Abraham's faith was "completed by his works?"

James knows the doctrine of justification by faith. Genesis 15:6 says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." James cites it in 2:23. He knows that Paul taught justification by

faith. He knows Abraham looked at the stars, believed, and was justified. He also knows that Abraham demonstrated his faith by his works. James corrects a false concept of faith. Someone said it this way:

That I say I have faith cannot possibly free me from sin, guilt, and punishment. How could something I say be my deliverance? Not that I say I have faith, but that I exercise faith, that saves me, situates me in God's peace, brings me God's grace, and is my righteousness before God. If faith gave me merely words, then it would be of use, after all, to say I have faith. But that is a sinister thought. Is that all I am, a thinker and talker? God has given me life, and that means he has planted a will in me that can act – that must act, with unalterable necessity. Service to God is action. I should thank God that I can act as one who trusts.¹

What happens if someone accuses a friend, someone you admire, of doing terrible evil? You look at their life and say, "I don't believe it. Their life, works, prove it impossible."

Works are not the ground of grace, they are grounded in grace and faith. People think they are being mocked when you say to them, "Keep warm and well fed," and give them neither food nor clothing. Just so the person who offers no tangible proofs of his faith but repeats every day, "I believe in God, I believe in God," seems to be mocking God.²

So James is correcting an abuse of the doctrine of justification by faith. When James says Abraham was "justified by works" (2:24), he doesn't mean Abraham earned salvation by works. Abraham was justified, declared righteous in God's court, the day he believed. Abraham was justified by works in the sense that the success of the bombers justified the Americans' confidence in their engineers. Deeds prove or vindicate a claim of faith.

Abraham's "work" of offering Isaac proves that God was right to declare Abraham righteous. His works prove that Abraham is "a friend of God" as Scripture says (2:23, ESV; cf. 2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8). The works prove God's confidence in Abram is well-founded, just as the success of the laser-guidance proved the military's confidence in them. His works confirm that he is a man.

So Paul and James agree: God justifies us the hour we believe. When we trust Jesus as Lord and Savior, their sin is laid on Jesus and Jesus' righteousness is imputed to them. Yet works also justify as they prove that we are alive in Christ.

When we say a believer is justified by faith alone, we mean that the believer adds nothing – no works – in order to earn or gain God's favor. Good works are necessary – not a condition prior to salvation but a result following salvation. A healthy fruit tree bears fruit, so a genuine believer necessarily performs good works as the result of our life in Christ. Real faith is effective Godward.

There are four ways to view the relationship between salvation and works.

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| 1 Works | -> Salvation |
| 2 Faith + Works | -> Salvation |
| 3 Faith | -> Salvation |
| 4 Faith | -> Salvation + Works |

View one says if we do enough good works they produce salvation by earning God's favor. View two says that if we believe and perform works we obtain salvation. View three says that faith results in

¹ Schlatter, *Encounter NT* Elwell/ Yarbrough, 357.

² Erasmus Works, 44:151

salvation. View four says faith leads to salvation and works follow. No Christian adheres to view one. Some theologians have adopted views two and three. But the New Testament says that while we're saved by faith alone, real faith is never alone. Works are the necessary results of spiritual life.

Faith and works

No one can be saved by "works of the law." But Jesus, Paul, James, stress the need for "works." "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). The faith that justifies is the one that works. Genuine disciples keep the law. True faith works in love (Gal 5:3, 6 Jas 2:8, 10). We show our faith by what we do (Eph 2:10, Jas 2:18).

The case of a helpful pagan, shows true faith is useful manward (2:25-26)

Abraham was a hero of the Jewish people, deeply revered. But James' next illustration of genuine faith is Rahab. Abraham is the father of Israel, the great patriarch. But Rahab is a Canaanite, a foreigner, and a prostitute. Yet Rahab illustrates real faith too, for her actions followed her beliefs.

After the Israelites escaped Egypt, they wandered the deserts for forty years. They entered Canaan, to conquer it under Joshua's leadership. Joshua sent scouts or spies to evaluate Jericho, a major city: were the people alert, ready to resist (Josh 2:1)? The spies entered Rahab's house. It was a logical place, located on the outer wall of the city. Besides who would question her for entertaining visitors?

The king of Jericho heard of the spies and demanded to see them. But Rahab hid them on her roof and told the king's men they had departed (2:2-6). The soldiers, trusting Rahab, ran to find the spies, who remained on the roof. Rahab went up to the spies and said, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us. For the LORD is God in heaven and earth" (2:9-11).

That sounds like faith, but we know her faith was genuine by her works. Rahab acted on her faith. When she hid the spies, she joined with Israel. Rahab said "the Lord reigns" and acted like she believed it (2:11). She helped the spies escape the city, letting them down the city wall with a rope in her window (2:15-21).

Rahab's faith led to action. She welcomed the spies, hid them, and helped them escape because she believed the God of Israel lives. She showed that living faith acts. She did the right thing at the right time. We need more of that.

Abraham and Rahab showed that real faith works. Intellectual belief in God would save neither Rahab nor the spies. She had to act. James says Rahab was "justified by works when she received the messengers" (2:25 ESV). Her works vindicated her claim of faith.

Waiting for Snow in Havana is the memoir of a boy, Carlos Eire, who lived in Cuba when Castro took over in 1959. Eire's father was a judge and a judge of character. From the first day, he said "Castro is up to no good." Before the firing squads, before all private property was "liberated," Judge Eire saw. He had resources and connections to flee to America, but he loved his art collection, so he stayed and stayed until he couldn't leave – he could only load his two sons on a plane to Miami, alone and penniless. Right belief without right action is useless.

Justification and faith in the New Testament

James startles educated Christians when he asks, "Was not Abraham our father – and Rahab - justified by works?" (2:21, 25, ESV). James knew some people needed to hear this. Some Jewish Christians who took pride in their theological knowledge. They thought their heritage and knowledge guaranteed them God's favor. James wrote for the kind of person who might say, today, "Don't bother me, I'm already a Christian; my faith is my private affair." James wants to undermine false confidence in mere words. He wrote to trouble those who found false comfort in mere ideas: "You see that a man is justified by works, not by faith alone" (2:24, ESV).

Paul, by contrast, ministered primarily to pagans with no idea how to get right with God. Paul explains how Gentiles enter the church. Must they follow laws about circumcision, food, association that separated Jews from other people? No. Must Gentiles keep laws that established a Jews' identity in order to be saved? Do we gain the kingdom by faith alone, or by faith plus certain works?

Paul answers, "A man is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom 3:28, ESV). We are justified through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 2:16, ESV). Paul corrects spiritual athletes who try to climb into heaven by their achievements.

Paul addresses people like John Wesley. He was a minister of the Church of England for ten years. Later, he became a missionary to the colony of Georgia. Wesley was largely a failure in ministry though he was very pious. He got up at four a. m. and prayed and read the Bible for hours before ministering in prisons and hospitals. He would teach and help others until late at night. On the way to America, there was a great storm at sea. Waves broke over the deck; wind shredded the sails and the ship seemed ready to sink. Wesley was terrified that he would die. Despite all his efforts, death frightened him. On the other side of the ship, a group of men sang hymns. He asked them how they could sing when they might die that very night. They replied, "If this ship goes down, we will go up to be with the Lord forever."

Wesley wondered how they could know that. He knew Jesus was Savior of the world, but didn't know Jesus had saved him. Worse, he thought the solution lay in works. "What more have they done than I have done? I came to convert the heathen, but who shall convert me?" Wesley toiled in vain in Georgia and returned to London. He went one night to an informal service where a man read a sermon by Martin Luther, explaining that genuine faith trusts Christ alone for salvation, Wesley realized he had relied on his works and not on Christ alone. That night he wrote in his journal. "About a quarter before nine, while [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone" that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from sin and death.

Are you like Wesley? If so, you need to hear the doctrine of justification by faith. If you wonder, "What more could I do?" you need Paul's gospel. We cannot climb into heaven. Our confession says: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."

But James writes for people who grew up with religion, but not faith. Is that you? If you assume that your heritage and knowledge guarantee God's favor, you need James. He says, "You see that a man is justified by **works**, and not by faith alone" (2:24). True faith manifests itself in service to man and obedience to God.

- True faith offers costly obedience to God, as Abraham proved.
- True faith offers costly service to fellow man, as Rahab proved.

This may help us understand what James means when he says "a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone." Justification is always a forensic or legal concept, but the term has more than one sense. In the old covenant, a judge was responsible to condemn the guilty and acquit (or "justify") the innocent (Deut 25:1). In a dispute, a judge was to justify the party that was innocent, righteous, and obedient to the law. Ideally, the declaration of innocence matched the character of the defendant, although the defendant's character was never the precise issue in the courtroom.

In God's courtroom, no one can be justified by God on the basis of their righteousness. Justification rests on Jesus' death and resurrection, imputed to all who believe in him. Therefore Paul can say "God... justifies the wicked" (Rom 4:5).

Justification is, properly speaking, a future event (Rom 2:13, 3:30; Gal 2:16). It occurs on the last day, when Christ returns and summons mankind to render an account for the deeds they have done in the body,

whether good or evil. They will appear before the Judge, and hear his verdict (Matt 25:31-33, Rom 14:10-12). Then he will "acquit" or "justify" all who believe in Christ. Because his atoning sacrifice covers our sins, because we are clothed in his righteousness, the evidence against us is discarded. He bore the punishment our misdeeds deserve. His holiness will be given to us. So God declares are justified, while still sinners (Rom 3:24, 5:8). This creates an apparent anomaly. When we say, "God justifies sinners" we say God declares something that from one perspective, seems incorrect - that sinners are "righteous." The union of believers to Christ makes God's declaration more than a legal fiction. Second, God also "causes the righteous state" which he declares.³

When Carlos was a little boy, he stole toys – little plastic soldiers went into his pockets every time he entered a toy store. His father, as noted, was a judge. His parents were honest and wealthy and their son's behavior appalled them. His mother watched his toys, noticed the mysterious appearance of new ones. She caught him, rebuked him, and elicited apologies but he stole again and again. One day his parents tried something new: they took him to the store, stood him before the owner, and made him confess to the owner. He was ashamed and humiliated and he finally understood. We are not thieves.

Two years later, after fleeing, Carlos and his brother were slowly starving in Miami. They had to live in a home for juvenile delinquents, eating just one meal a day. But when he had a chance to steal some food he refused. "Stealing was wrong, but not just because it was a sin. [It] was an affront to my mother and father... a betrayal of the [people and] memories that mattered most to me."⁴

A changed heart leads to changed behavior. When disciples live out the faith, Jesus says good words and deeds flow from us (Matt 12:34-37). These good deeds prove that our faith is real. They give evidence of our faith. They vindicate God's decision to justify us, not because we are good, but because we came to life, by faith. As Schlatter said, when we exercise faith, it proves God has given us life.

What does your life say about you? Do you care for the poor, the needy, the widow, the orphan? Do you offer hard obedience to God, as Abraham did? Do you do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, as Rahab did?

Active faith unites us to God and justifies us – declares us righteous. God declares us righteous the moment we believe, not because we become perfectly righteous at that moment, but because we are united to Jesus, the righteous one.

Because we are united to Christ, good deeds flow from us. They declare afresh that we are righteous. Good deed proved that Abraham and Rahab truly believed in God and they do the same for us. In that sense a believer is justified – declared righteous - by works. Jesus righteousness courses through us when we trust him and we know we are alive and blessed by God.

³ Murray, Redemption, 123.

⁴ Snow, 125-7.