

# James 2:21-26

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## *Obedience Puts Life into Our Faith*

*James shows that works born of faith bring life and purpose to faith. He uses Abraham as an example of someone who had faith, and then did right by obeying God. His works worked together with his faith to create benefit and blessing. Rahab also had faith, and acted on that faith, so her works showed she was obedient to God. This obedient action-taking puts life into our faith just as a spirit puts life into a body, and its result is our maturation.*

James has just detailed an objection he anticipates from some of his readers. An Objector will try to make the case that, in the context of spiritual maturity, faith and works are separate and have no relationship with one another. James responds by saying, “This is foolish. Do you want me to prove to you how faith without works is useless?”

Here is James’s proof that works give life and bring meaning to our faith:

*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.*

James’s response to the Objector is to appeal to the example of *Abraham*. Abraham is proof that *works* and *faith* are intimately connected. However, the focus is narrowed as James recalls the priority of Christian perfection (maturity) from James 1:2-4.

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be **perfect and complete**, lacking in nothing.”  
(James 1:2-4)

The argument here is twofold:

- Like Abraham, we can be justified by works.
- Works added to faith grows our faith.

Abraham is declared as *justified* by works.

Like “salvation,” “justification” is not a technical term, it does not always have the same meaning. Justification is when “something aligns with a standard.” For example, a “left-justified” paragraph is one that aligns with the left margin. Someone who is indicted of a crime is justified if they are found innocent, that they have sufficiently aligned with the applicable laws.

Believers are justified in the sight of God when they believe on Jesus, who paid a ransom for our sins, thus aligning us with the righteousness of God (Romans 4:3; Genesis 15:6).

In James 2:21, Abraham is justified by his works when he *offered up Isaac his son on the altar*. This episode occurred decades after Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Acts 7:1-3; Genesis 15:6). So Abraham was already justified in the sight of God, because of his faith. But none of us would know, apart from God telling us, that Abraham was justified in God's sight. However, when Abraham *offered up Isaac his son on the altar* simply because God asked him to, believing that God would raise Isaac from the dead, everyone could see for themselves that Abraham had faith. So Abraham was justified in the sight of men.

James argues that when we do good deeds born of faith, our faith becomes visible to others. And that is a good thing. That is to be a primary witness, that others might learn to obey Jesus's commands, and learn of His ways (Matthew 28:20; 1 Peter 3:15).

Paul asserts that all believers are justified in the sight of God simply and solely by faith, saying,

“nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16)

It is likely that the book of James existed at the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans. This could be why Paul asserts “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God” (Romans 4:2). Abraham was justified in the sight of humans when he was shown to be the *friend of God* when he *offered up Isaac his son on the altar*. Therefore, in that respect he “has something to boast about” before humans.

But Abraham does not have anything to boast about before God, because in God's sight, we are all justified by faith alone. Therefore Paul allows for James's assertion that Abraham was justified before men when *he was called the friend of God* because of his obedient faith, and therefore was *justified by works* in the sight of men, and *not by faith alone*. James's assertion is also compatible with that of Paul's as James asserts that when Abraham *offered up Isaac his son on the altar* then *the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”*

When a scripture is *fulfilled*, it means that what was spoken before has come to pass. In the case of Abraham, God declared him righteous because of his faith (Genesis 15:6). Decades later, that righteousness was manifest in human experience, being lived out by Abraham when he *offered up Isaac*. Therefore, what had occurred previously was *fulfilled*. Paul speaks of the Mosaic Law being fulfilled when New Testament believers walk in the Spirit:

“...so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:4)

In this verse from Romans 8, what was spoken in the Law as being in the best interest of ourselves and our communities actually comes to pass, is fulfilled, when we walk in the Spirit, which is to walk in the commands of Jesus.

The idea of being righteous is to align with a standard of God's design. When we walk by faith that God knows best, we live according to God's original design, which brings harmony/peace to our lives, families, and communities. James, however, as the wise pragmatist, is speaking of an outworking of righteousness. When each member of the body works according to the instructions of the head, the body functions well (1 Corinthians 12:27).

The outworking of righteousness (justification) is found in the sequence James affirms. *Faith* was *working* together (Greek, "synergeo," the foundation of the English word synergy) with *works* to then 'perfect' or complete faith. In this sequence, *faith was perfected*, it reaches completeness or maturity when the works have the stated effect of growing the faith.

This picture of growth stands in stark contrast with James's early emphasis on faith being dead (James 2:17). He is drawing a distinction between useless faith (v. 20) and useful faith (faith plus action, *perfected*, completed). The Greek word translated *perfected* is "teleioo," and is sometimes translated "fulfilled, finished, and accomplished." It carries the idea of reaching a conclusion. Getting to the finish line. Gaining the point where all that was intended to be accomplished has been fulfilled. The picture here is that God's purpose for our lives is fulfilled in experience when we walk in the obedience of faith. This is basically the same assertion that James made in his opening statement, to:

"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance."  
(James 1:2-3)

The "perfect result" of faithful endurance through trials is to "be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). James is instructing his readers with an eye toward spiritual growth, so that believers are making their way toward maturity. Maturity is the point of living. God wants His children to grow up, and become all they can be.

When works are added to faith, faith is *perfected*, it is complete, reaching its logical conclusion. Faith with no action is useless—it does no good. The inverse is true; works done without faith do not please God and are hollow. They are a performance done to hide sin or win approval from men (Psalm 51:16-17, Romans 7:6, Ephesians 6:6-7, Hebrews 6:1). When we act in obedience, believing God, we experience maturation and are living "rightly"; in that sense we are *justified* before men and angels through our lives, living in alignment with God's will, both believing and obeying (Ephesians 3:10).

James is emphasizing that faith-alone righteous living is not possible. Faith must be put to work in order to actually live righteously:

*You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

This again references back to Abraham being justified before men by his deeds, showing he is the *friend of God*. James is not addressing one's eternal destiny, but one's practical spirituality. *Works* added to *faith* in specific ways causes the growth of the *faith*. Believing a brother or sister should be fed and clothed, but doing nothing to feed and clothe them is 'dead' and 'unpracticed' faith. That is until, and unless, deeds that match the faith are taken (James 2:15-17).

Sanctification is the process of maturing through a life of obedient faith, believing that God's ways are for our best. It is a matter of believing and doing, of believing an action is God's will, that God's way is for our best, then taking that action. Dead faith is simply wishing someone in need, "Good luck! I hope the best for you!", while living faith is actually clothing and feeding that person.

Clearly James is not saying one is justified before God by works instead of by faith. Scripture makes clear that only Jesus's deeds can merit our justification in the sight of God, and that is received freely by faith (John 3:14-16). James is saying that in this sense of justification, or doing right, that living out our faith in the sight of others is how our life lines up with God's will.

James provides another example of *faith* working together with *works* from the Old Testament:

*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?*

*Rahab* is another illustration of both believing and acting on that belief. She is another counterexample to the Objector whom James continues to refute. She had faith that God was supreme, and would deliver the land of Canaan to the Israelites, including her city of Jericho. She put her belief into practice and took actions which matched her belief (she saved the lives of the Israelite spies/messengers by hiding them then sending them out of Jericho *by another way*, so that they wouldn't be captured). Concerning both Abraham and Rahab, we can imagine how their inaction would have resulted in dire results; the glaring problem with a dead/useless faith.

Imagine if Rahab, like the unhelpful believer in James 2:15-17, merely wished the Israelite spies "Good luck! I'm cheering for you. I'm sure it will all work out." and then walked away, doing nothing to shelter them or help them escape the city by secret. The spies could have been captured and killed by the King of Jericho, who was searching for them. Or God could have delivered them through another means. In either case, Rahab and her family would have died in Jericho as a result of her inaction (Joshua 2:17-21).

Not only was Rahab's life saved, she was also rewarded by being placed into the lineage of King David, and ultimately of Jesus Christ. She is one of a few women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). In his use of Rahab as an example, James appears to be doing at least two things. First, he is connecting with the "crown of life" that is the eternal reward for faithfulness (James 1:12). A crown is a sign of authority, and Rahab was placed into the reigning family of Israel as her reward for faithfulness. Second, it seems James is making clear that although he is addressing Jewish "brethren," these admonitions are for everyone. This is consistent with the biblical theme that God practices no partiality:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”  
(Galatians 3:28)

Now James states a plain analogy that is easily misunderstood without some careful examination:

*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.* Looking carefully at the analogy:

- James is offering an analogy of a physical body and faith, where:
  - Dead Person = Body without the Spirit
  - Dead Faith = Faith without Works
  - Specifically, Body is analogous to Faith
  - & Spirit is analogous to Works

The analogy builds from the *body/spirit* connection. The *spirit* is the thing that animates or gives life to the *body*. The analogy is about infusing life. The *spirit* infuses, animates, excites, and provides life for the *body*. Without the *spirit*, the *body* still exists, but it is literally lifeless.

In a similar way, without works, faith still exists, but it is lifeless. It isn't doing anything. It is dead. We can view a lifeless body. We can touch a lifeless body. It is still a body. But it does not move, talk, interact, or engage. In the same way, a believer can have faith, but if their faith is not animated with deeds, their faith is not interacting or engaging. Therefore it is not bringing life to its surroundings.

Connected back to the example of providing food and clothes to those in need, such a deed brings life to a community because it is engaging with others. It is putting into action the core biblical principle of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39).

The application of the analogy is that *works* animate, excite, and provide life for the practical *faith* James is explaining. *Faith* is lifeless and *dead*, just like a spiritless *body*, if there are no *works* added to the *faith*. When we believe and act, our *faith* grows. We are then on the path James charts out for us in Chapter 1. When we believe and fail to act, our *faith* atrophies, even unto lifelessness.

A final point is a practical one. When one reads this passage, the hoped-for impulse in the faithful Christian is to recognize you are being exhorted to do good works, to take action, to put the commands of Jesus into daily practice. This response is what James is after. Indeed, he mentioned it earlier as well:

“But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”  
(James 1:25)

The forgetful hearer is the same as the one who says, “Be warmed and be filled...” but does not help the cold, hungry man (James 2:15-16). The hearer knows a truth to be believed and acted upon, but they walk away forgetful and actionless. James is calling for action to match one’s faith. If we fail to act upon our faith by actually doing good deeds, we will lose the promised blessing. If we do act upon our faith, then the blessings will flow. Again, thinking back to Chapter 1, those blessings are certain, but they are spiritual, and require wisdom to see (James 1:5).

For the believer, one destined for heaven, it is possible (but counter-productive) to fail to grow in maturity by separating faith from works. Such a separation would allow us to maintain that “We do spiritual things for God, but worldly things for our earthly enjoyment; the two are not connected.” This might provide an internal justification to live a worldly life, but James makes clear in this passage that such rationalization is delusional.

Rather, James urges us to accept responsibility for our choices, and be good stewards of our choices by trusting that God’s ways are for our best, choosing a perspective that difficulties and disappointments are an opportunity to mold our faith, then directing our faith toward deeds that are in keeping with Jesus’s commands to use our gifts to benefit others, which is love.

James is trying to move believers to focus on faithful living, and to move them away from wrong thinking, following the ways of the world, which claim they lead to life but actually lead to death. He is trying to get us to choose a perspective that being faithful in all circumstances is actually the way to our greatest fulfillment. He is trying to get us to see our natural appetites/pleasures as pathways leading to death, while walking in the obedience of faith is the actual path to the fulfillment of our deepest desires for belonging to God’s royal family, to be approved by our heavenly Father (James 1:12).

**The following TheBibleSays Commentary is an embellished paraphrase of James 2:14-26. We offer this for consideration, noting that it is the scriptures that are inspired by God, and the Holy Spirit is our true teacher (2 Timothy 3:16; John 14:26):**

What benefit is there my brothers and sisters in Christ if one of you says he has faith but does not put works with it? Can that faith deliver him from anything?

If a brother or sister in Christ has no clothes and no food, and one of you says to them, “Have a good day; hope it works out for you,” but you do not give them what they need for their physical suffering, what good does it do?

Thus, faith when it sits alone and you do not put works with it, is useless and starts to wither.

But someone might object to embracing such a responsibility. They might say: “Look, faith and works are two different things, and they don’t have a relationship. You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith separate from your works (which you cannot do), and I’ll show you my faith by my works (which I cannot do). See, they are not connected.”

“Here, let me prove it to you. You believe that there is one true God, and your response is to do good things. But look, the demons also believe that too. But their response is just the opposite. They tremble in fear. So, there’s my proof that there is no essential connection between faith and works.”

Now I, James, say to any such objector: You are a foolish man for claiming there is no relationship between faith and works. Such a rationalization to dodge responsibility to help others is foolhardy. Faith and works are so related that faith without works is a dead-end.

Do you want me to prove it? My proof is our earthly father Abraham, who grew to be righteous and showed it openly to others when he offered Isaac his son on the altar. He did this decades after he believed the promise of God and was justified in the sight of God. So you see that being justified in the sight of God comes only by faith (Genesis 15:6) while being justified before others in this life requires actions that are consistent with faith.

So you can see that with Abraham, faith and works were cooperating and having such an impact together that we can say, “Works, when added to faith, makes our faith grow.” In this story of Abraham, the righteousness of Abraham as stated in Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” was a spiritual reality. But it was fulfilled when Abraham acted in faith by offering Isaac. Thus, we fulfill a spiritual reality when we live out that reality by faith.

And so when others saw all of this, they called Abraham God’s friend. This is because they could see by Abraham’s deeds that he was lined up (justified) with God’s commands. So you can see that there is a further kind of justification, a justification before people living in this world. Abraham grew to be righteous by the good choices he made, and showed it outwardly in what he did. In this way we can say that Abraham did not stay at a place of “faith only,” he matured.

Rahab is the same type of example, in which her works were connected with her faith, and she was openly seen as a follower of God. Her faith was not dead, withering, or useless. Rather, it saved the lives of the messengers of Israel as she sent them out of the city by a secret way.

Let me offer a final analogy to make this clear. When the physical body does not have a spirit, that body is lifeless, useless, and dead—though it still exists and was once alive, it is now dead. In the same way, if you know and believe God, but do not act on that faith in your daily Christian life, then your faith is also lifeless: it is useless, and it will wither.

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>21</sup> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup> 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? <sup>26</sup> For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.