

Working Faith
James 2:20-26
ABC 6/9/19

AW Tozer wrote several decades ago: *There is an evil which I have seen under the sun ... upon the Christian religion.... It is the glaring disparity between theology & practice among professing Christians.*¹ This problem has been long observed from inside & outside the church. The philosopher skeptic Kierkegaard tells a parable of Duckland:

*It was Sunday morning, & all the ducks dutifully came to church, waddling through the doors & down the aisle into their pews where they comfortably squatted. When all were well-settled, & the hymns were sung, the duck minister waddled to his pulpit, opened the Duck Bible & read: "Ducks! You have wings, & with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" It was a marvelous, elevating duck scripture, & thus all the ducks quacked their assent with a hearty "Amen!" – & then they plopped down from their pews & waddled home.*²

That parable isn't far off from many professing Christians, whose faith doesn't fly or do much of anything besides agree & believe intellectually. This is the problem James is addressing. He tells us we can't separate behavior from belief. Tozer again said:

*Faith & obedience are two sides of the same coin & are always found together in the Scriptures. As well try to pry apart the two sides of a half-dollar as to separate obedience from faith. The two sides, while they remain together & are taken as one, represent good sound currency & constitute legal tender everywhere in the United States. Separate them & they are valueless. Insistence upon honoring but one side of the faith-obedience coin has wrought frightful harm in religious circles. Faith has been made everything & obedience nothing. The result ... is moral weakness, spiritual blindness & a slow but constant drift away from NT Christianity.*³

As a Catholic priest & monk, Martin Luther observed all the rituals & disciplines of his order, but none seemed to bring him close to God. He feared God & His righteous judgment, but he also hated God because of His demand for perfect righteousness. Try as he might, Luther knew he could never satisfy God's standard. Finally, after years of struggle, he was wrestling with Paul's words in Rom 1:17, that in the gospel **the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'** Here are Luther's own words:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, & nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God,' because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous & deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous.... Night & day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace & sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn & to have gone through

¹ *The Root of the Righteous*, p 51

² Cited in Kent Hughes, *James*, Logos edition

³ *The Size of the Soul*, p 160

*open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, & whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven.*⁴

A biographer explains, *Luther moved from viewing righteousness as active, as something he had to achieve, to viewing it as passive, something Christ achieved on his behalf, apprehended not by our merits but by faith alone.*⁵ Coming out of his struggles with trying to work his way to right standing with God, Luther had trouble understanding James. In his preface to the NT of 1522, he called James *an epistle of straw*. Opponents would bring up Js 2 to support their view that it's faith plus works that's the basis for God to declare man righteous. Luther struggled over how to respond & stumbled over our text, 2:20-26. Although he didn't reject James from the canon of Scripture, he once remarked *he would give his doctor's beret to anyone who could reconcile James & Paul.*⁶ Fortunately, we're privileged to stand on the shoulders of many wise men who've gone before & find it's not that hard to reconcile these 2. James & Paul bring complementary, not contradictory messages. Rather than viewing James & Paul as in conflict with each other, we should view them as standing back to back fighting 2 different enemies of the gospel: empty faith & a works salvation. They're 2 soldiers defending the same gospel from 2 different enemies.

As I said last week, this isn't simply an academic debate, because it deals with the most crucial question there is: *How can sinful man become right with a holy God?* Is it faith plus what we do that earns us grace & citizenship in God's kingdom? If someone we know at one point, a long time ago, seemed to have faith & maybe even still knows & claims to believe all the right things about God, but whose life is now lived with no fruit & no works that match up, are they truly saved? Were they ever? James says 3x that faith without works is dead or worthless. He says the type of faith that is only on the lips (14) or in the head (19) doesn't save any more than a demon's faith. Not all who profess faith possess true saving faith. **2:14-26 PRAY**

1. Justified by faith alone We saw last week that James & Paul both teach that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. & both teach that good works prove our faith is genuine.

⁴ cited in Eerdman's *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Tim Dowley, p 366

⁵ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life & Thought*, p 38

⁶ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, p 259

At the Jerusalem Council the debate was whether Gentiles were saved by faith in Christ alone or whether they also had to keep the Jewish rite of circumcision. After much debate, Peter stated, God **made no distinction between us (Jews) & them (Gentiles), cleansing their hearts by faith.** He continued, **we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are** (Acts 15:9, 11). James then got up & affirmed what Peter had stated. He went on to request that believing Gentiles abstain from certain matters so they wouldn't offend the Jews (Acts 15:13-21). James clearly agreed that God saves & cleanses us by grace through faith. Good works aren't mentioned. Someone may object,

But Paul says, we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law (Rom 3:28). He also said, But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness (Rom 4:5). But James states that Abraham & Rahab were justified by works (Js 2:21, 25). He plainly says, You see that a man is justified by works & not by faith alone (2:24). How can you possibly reconcile these words with Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone?

Remember, they're addressing different problems. Paul was writing to those who taught we must add our works to faith in Christ in order to be justified. He clearly said that to do so was to preach a false gospel & to put oneself under condemnation (Gal 1:6-9). James, however, was writing to those who claimed they had saving faith, but their lives didn't show it. Their profession of faith was mere words, with no evidence of a changed life. Also, Paul & James were using the word **justified** in different senses. Paul was looking at God's initial declaration that the believer is righteous through faith in the blood of Christ (Rom 3:22). In Rom 4:3 Paul cites the same vs that Js 2:23 quotes, Gen 15:6, **Abraham believed God, & it was credited to him as righteousness.** Paul uses it to argue that Abraham wasn't justified by his works, but by faith alone. He was looking at the beginning of a person's right standing with God. James uses the vs & the word **justified** differently. James says Abraham was justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar (2:21). He then explains, **22-23a**

He then quotes Gen 15:6. The event of Abraham's faith found in Gen 15:6 happened some 30 or so years before Abraham offered Isaac on the altar. James says his obedience in offering Isaac perfected his faith & fulfilled the Scripture, referring to his initial faith (Gen 15:6). James isn't looking at the beginning of Abraham's faith, but at its mature outcome many years later.

When Paul uses the word **justify** he's referring to how a person gets into relationship with God. James uses to show what that relationship must look like to prove genuine faith. James claims that the righteousness Abraham had received from God by faith (Gen 15:6) was demonstrated openly when he obeyed God by offering Isaac on the altar (Gen 22). James is demonstrating that Abraham's faith went much further than mere intellectual assent. He emphasizes that Abraham's faith wasn't a once & done thing. It wasn't a mere intellectual or verbal profession. It was an active thing, constantly at work as seen in his deeds.⁷ God's work saves us to do good works as His workmanship (Eph 2:8-10). He works in us & we're saved for good works, not saved by them.

There's another factor to consider in reconciling James & Paul. When James says **a man is justified by works & not by faith alone** (24), the addition of the word **alone** shows he's referring to the false faith he's been talking about in this section. This false faith, a faith that doesn't result in a life of good deeds, isn't the kind of justifying faith that Paul talks about in Rom 3-4. Paul often spoke about things like **the obedience of faith** (Rom 1:5; 16:26; cf 15:18). He emphasized the role of good deeds as a result of God's grace in the lives of His people (Titus 2:14; 3:5-8). Both Paul & James agree that genuine faith that justifies always results in a life of good deeds. False faith, an empty or intellectual profession, never justifies. If a sinner can get into a relationship with God only by faith, as Paul *seems* to say, the ultimate validation of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produce, as James teaches. John Calvin put it this way, *As Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned righteous.*⁸ Never forget both James & Paul teach we are justified by faith alone. They also both teach...

2. Faith Without Works Doesn't Save James calls the one who thinks he can have saving faith that has no effect in his life a **foolish fellow** (20). He asks, *Do you realize that faith without works is useless?* He gives an illustration from Abraham's faith (21-23) & then restates his thesis in vs 24.

⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, pp 134-136

⁸ *Institutes*, 3:17:12

He then gives a 2nd illustration from Rahab's life (25) & concludes with a brief illustration & restatement of his point (26).

A. Abraham's Works Proved His Faith was Genuine (21-23). Abraham wasn't saved by his obedience in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Rather, that obedience proved the reality of his previous saving faith. Heb 11:8 states, **By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed.** That refers to his obedience in leaving his homeland & going to the Promised Land. Heb 11:17 adds, **By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac.** In fact, all through Heb 11, we read of what the heroes of faith did. **By faith Abel offered ... a better sacrifice** (4). **By faith Noah** built the ark (7). **By faith Moses ... chose to endure ill-treatment with** God's people & leave Egypt (24-26). All through the chapter we see how faith acted. It's the same point James is making. Faith isn't mere words with no actions. Genuine faith works. The proof that Abraham believed God is seen in his actions. He obediently offered up Isaac. Genuine faith & works are inseparable, because genuine faith always results in good works. James is reflecting the words of Jesus when He said, **For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good** (Lk 6:43-44).

Back in James, when vs 22 says faith was **perfected** or **completed** in this event, it means it reached the goal or end that God intended. God was perfecting Abraham's faith. Jesus Himself is called the Author & Perfecter of our faith in Heb 12:1-2 after talking about Abraham in chapter 11. One form of the word **perfected** in vs 22 was used in Greek literature for mature, full-grown, fruitful trees. A man plants an orchard & may have to wait many years before the fruit blooms & reaches full productivity. But when it does it's not then that the tree's life started or became real. No, it's now reaching the fruition & full expression of its life that was intended back when the farmer 1st planted it & it came alive.

Vs 23 clearly says it was when Abraham believed God, that God credited righteousness to Abraham's account & life. He was declared righteous by God alone in His grace alone, but Abraham was demonstrated or shown to be righteous to others by his obedience that flowed out of his

genuine faith as most vividly seen in Gen 22. Note also that James adds that Abraham **was called the friend of God** (23). That expression is used twice in the OT to describe Abraham (2 Chron 20:7; Is 41:8). How amazing is it that God calls us His friends? Jesus connected friendship with Him with obedience to Him when He said, **You are My friends if you do what I command you** (Jn 15:14). The obedient faith James is describing isn't just outward obedience to a list of commandments. It's certainly not a grudging obedience to a cruel taskmaster. Rather, it's an obedience that involves personal friendship with the holy God of the universe. When you believe in Jesus as the One who died for your sins, God not only declares you righteous, He also calls you **into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord** (1 Cor 1:9).

James wraps up his illustration of Abraham by saying, **24**.

James would have been shocked if anyone suggested he was arguing for salvation by works. He simply saw faith & works as inseparable. James knew we are justified by faith alone, but not by faith which is alone. He'd say that if your faith is alone, you're self-deceived & would urge you to experience real faith, one that works!

B. Rahab's Works Proved Her Faith was Genuine (25) James may have picked Rahab to contrast with Abraham. He was the revered patriarch; she was the redeemed prostitute. He was a godly man; she was an ungodly woman. He was the father of the Hebrews; she was a pagan foreigner. He was the Hero of the Jews; she was the shady Lady of Jericho. God had promised him the land of Canaan; she was one of the pagans living in that land. He received direct revelation from God; she heard indirect 2nd-hand information about God. He was called a friend of God; she was of the people who were enemies of God. He's a major Bible figure; she's a minor one. He's the father of the faith; she was totally outside the faith. He was a great leader; she was a common citizen. Opposites in so many ways. Or, there may be a subtle comparison, in that both Abraham & Rahab were models of faith & hospitality, in contrast to the dead faith of the man in vs 15-16. Whatever the case, in bringing **Rahab the harlot** to close his argument on what saving faith looks like, James gives the spectrum of God's multi-faceted mercy which covers everything in-between. If you say, *I could never have the faith of Abraham*. Remember, Rahabs are saved too (Josh 2, 7). No one is

beyond the grace of God. When the 2 Hebrew spies came to town, she hid them from the king's men & sent them out by a way so they could escape. But before she sent them off, she testified of how she'd heard of what God had done for Israel in delivering them from Egypt & in the victories they'd won in the wilderness. She added, **for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above & on earth beneath** (Josh 2:11). That was her verbal confession of faith. Then she secured their pledge to save her & her family from the coming destruction & slaughter of Jericho. James' point is that Rahab didn't just say, *I believe in your God*, & then allow the king's men to arrest the spies. Rather, at the risk of her own life, she helped these men to escape & carefully obeyed their instructions about how she & her family could be spared when Israel invaded Jericho. Her faith wasn't just empty words. Her faith worked in that it met the need of the Jewish spies.

It's interesting that Rahab is usually referred to in the Bible as **Rahab the harlot**, even after her conversion. Matthew Henry draws several lessons from James' mention of Rahab. 1) Her life points to *the wonderful power of faith in transforming & changing sinners*. She left her evil life & although she was a Canaanite, she's later included in the genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:5). What amazing grace! 2) Her example shows how highly God regards a working faith. No matter how great your sins, the Bible promises, **Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved** (Rom 10:13). 3) Her life shows that where great sins are pardoned, there must be great acts of self-denial. She had to prefer the honor of God & the good of His people ahead of the preservation of her own country. She had to abandon her old friends & turn completely from her former course of life. To follow Christ, we must count the cost & turn from our sins. 4) The fact that she's still called **Rahab the harlot**, even after salvation, shows that *her former character must be remembered; not so much to her dishonor as to glorify the rich grace & mercy of God*.⁹ It is good for all of us to remember, *I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see*.¹⁰

As we think about the faith & works of Abraham & Rahab, don't forget that in the same chpt in Genesis (12) that Abraham is called by God's grace, he conspires to have his wife Sarah lie & say

⁹ Matthew Henry's Commentary, 6:983

¹⁰ John Newton, *Amazing Grace*

they're not married to protect himself. They later team up again to sin by him conceiving a child outside their marriage (16). James is clearly not saying that saving faith has perfect obedience (both Abraham & Rahab are presented with all their faults). But there's a pattern of life of real obedience with real faith that grows & shows its fruit to others. We're not saved by good works or being a good person. Rahab had an unsavory life when she was saved! But God rescues us as we are with our sinful baggage & background but doesn't leave us there. He graciously changes us, giving us a new direction, & a new heart to obey, to the glory of what John Bunyan called *grace abounding to the chief of sinners*.¹¹ There's room around the throne in heaven for repentant harlots & homosexuals, tax collectors & terrorists, racist & rapist, even self-righteous religious hypocrites who repent! & there are people in the Bible in each of these categories who were saved! 1 Cor 6:11 says, **Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ & in the Spirit of our God.**

James, with Paul, believed we're justified by faith alone. But also, with Paul, James believed that good works prove that faith is genuine. Both Abraham & Rahab demonstrate this. Their faith wasn't just an empty profession, but resulted in obedience in some very difficult situations. Finally, James concludes:

3. Faith without works is dead faith (26) James uses a brief analogy to reinforce his point: **26**

If you see a body that isn't breathing, you can conclude it's a dead body. If you see *faith* that doesn't produce good works, you can conclude it's a dead faith. Works are not added to faith but are an inherent part of genuine faith. If you see someone breathing, you don't think, *That guy added breathing to his life!* No! Breathing is part of living. Good works to a Christian are like breathing is to a body, it shows there is life. Your body could stop breathing for a while, but not for long & be truly alive. Works are the fruit of salvation, not the root of salvation.

Charles Simeon offers 2 wise bits of counsel: 1) Do not separate faith & works. 2) Do not confound faith & works.¹² There are those who separate faith & works. They think they're preserving

¹¹ His spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, or a Brief Relation of the Exceeding Mercy of God in Christ to his Poor Servant John Bunyan*

¹² *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible*, 20:70

salvation by faith alone in Christ alone by their teaching. But in reality they deny what Scripture teaches about the nature of genuine faith, that it's inseparable from a life of good works. For example, they teach that someone may believe in Christ for salvation & yet live a completely sinful, worldly life. He may even deny Christ at some point but they say he'll be saved because he once believed. But the Bible clearly teaches that if God imparts new life to a formerly dead sinner, that new life & the saving faith that God grants will inevitably show itself in a life of good deeds (Jn 5:28-29; 1 Jn 3:7-10). This doesn't mean true believers never sin. It does mean that the direction & motivation of life is different in those whose heart has been changed by God's grace. We cannot separate faith & works! Neither should we confuse faith & works. Sinful human nature is oriented towards works-righteousness. Pride makes us think we can be good enough to earn God's favor. We think God will grade on the curve & since we're better than average (in our own eyes), we'll get into heaven because of our good works. That's an eternally fatal mistake to make. To confuse faith with works denies the gospel of God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The following quote sums up well what James is saying:

He who wants to be a true Christian or to belong to the kingdom of Christ must be truly a believer. But he does not truly believe if works of love do not follow his faith... It is true that faith alone justifies, without works; but I am speaking about genuine faith, which, after it has justified, will not go to sleep but is active through love.¹³

Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; & so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, & is always at the doing of them. He who does not these works is a faithless man. He gropes & looks about after faith & good works, & knows neither what faith is nor what good works are, though he talks & talks, with many words, about faith & good works.¹⁴

That quote is from none other than Martin Luther. Luther agrees with & James & Paul. The biblical truth is we are justified by faith alone, but good works prove that our faith in Christ alone is genuine, saving faith.

Turn in closing to Heb 11. The whole chapter is really an exposition on our text in Js 2, showing OT believer after believer who'd turned from sin to trust & obey the Lord. It's rightly called the hall of faith & it's a fitting place to end our studies on what true faith looks like. Vss 8-9 ...

¹³ *Luther's Works, Vol 27: Lectures on Galatians.*

¹⁴ *Commentary to the Romans, p xvii*

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; & he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived... Vss 17-19, By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, & he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type...

Vss 30-34, By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient (note her faith is contrasted with those who didn't obey), after she had welcomed the spies in peace. & what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David & Samuel & the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight...

There's really only one hero in this chapter (or the whole book) & He's a Hero with a capital *H*. All sinners are saved only by His grace through faith, but even faith is not of ourselves but is God's gift to us. We can't even pat ourselves on the back for our faith, as the Lord is the Author & Perfecter of our faith. From start to finish, He's to be our focus. The same Lord who creates out of nothing, calls Abraham, credits righteousness by grace, causes miracle babies to be born to elderly couples, also keeps all His children until the end! We have the same red-sea-dividing, wilderness-guiding, & manna-providing Lord who we can still take refuge in! We can put our faith in the same sinful harlot-saving, dead-raising, martyr-sustaining, & slingshot-giant-slaying Lord. We can pray to the same Egyptian-army-drowning Redeemer, Jericho-wall-downing Deliverer, shepherd-boy-crowning King, who is our unchanging, grace-abounding Savior & Lord! He's the conqueror of the promised land, opener of barren wombs, closer of lion mouths, & cooler of fiery furnaces! Do we believe He's the same yesterday, today, & forever, or does our lack of faith say He's not big enough to handle our problems? How can we not have faith in this Lord who never changes? How can we not want to trust & obey & love the Father who loved us so he gave His only begotten Son? What a mighty God we serve! What a wonderful Savior we have! How can we be so consumed with & focused on such lesser things instead of trusting in & obeying a God of such glory, grandeur, magnificence, greatness, faithfulness, goodness, providence, grace, & mercy? Fix your eyes on nothing else!

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance & the sin which so easily entangles us, & let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author & perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him

endured the cross, despising the shame, & has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary & lose heart (Heb 12:1-3).

Those poor ducks waddled in & out of church & never flew as they were created to do, because their *faith* was nothing more than mental assent. Few things are as inglorious as a waddle, & few things are more glorious than a duck in flight. All God's people have wings. The 1st wing is faith, faith alone. The 2nd is works, a faith that works. May your faith produce the fruit of good works this week as you keep your eyes focused on Jesus!