

James 2:21-26 – Living Faith

1

Introduction

James has taught us that there are many types of faith. These “faiths” are divided into two groups. One group is very large and is known as “dead faith”. This is faith that has no substance, no change, no outworking, and no works. There is also “living” or “saving faith”. This is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is evidenced by a life that surrenders to the “Lordship” of Christ and building one’s life upon His Word.

James will contrast this living faith with what he has just described as dead faith (vv. 14–20). Where dead faith is unproductive, nonredemptive, and practiced by demons, living faith saves, is productive, and is Godly. James gives two illustrations of living faith.

The first is Abraham, revered patriarch and father of the Hebrew people (vv. 21–24). The second is Rahab, a Gentile prostitute (v. 25).

2

James 2:21-26

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? ²² Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? ²³ And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. ²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way? ²⁶ For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

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Abraham

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Although James’s primary audience was Jewish, the context suggests that his reference to **Abraham our father** is not racial. He seems rather to write of Abraham in the same spiritual sense that Paul does. In his letter to the church at Rome, the apostle speaks of Abraham as **“the father of all who believe”** (Rom. 4:11), and in his letter to the churches of Galatia he declares that “those who are of faith ... are sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7). Abraham is the model of saving faith for both Jew and Gentile, a man whose faith was living and acceptable to God.

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Man in his natural state is **spiritually dead**. There is **nothing man can do to make himself right and acceptable** before the Lord. Salvation has always been through the grace of God working through man's faith. It is not true that in the Old Testament men were saved through the law and that in the New they are saved by faith. Regardless of when a person lived, people were **always saved through faith**. Genesis 15:6 states, "And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

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Yet James says that Abraham was "**justified by works**". That seeming contradiction is clarified by understanding that justification by faith refers to a person's standing **before God**, whereas the justification by works that James speaks of in this verse pertains to a person's standing **before other men**.

James is teaching, then, that Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac vindicates his faith before men. There is thus no conflict between him and Paul.

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The Greek verb "justified" has **two general meanings**.

The first pertains to **acquittal**, that is, "**to declaring and treating a person as righteous**". That is its meaning in relationship to salvation and is the sense in which Paul almost always uses the term. He declares, for example, that we are "**being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**" (Rom. 3:24), "justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (3:28), and that, "having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1; cf. v. 9). In another letter he says, "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" (Gal. 2:16; cf. 3:11, 24). He reminds Titus that "being justified by His grace we [are] made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7).

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The second meaning of "justified" pertains to "**vindication**", or "**proof of righteousness**". It is used in that sense a number of times in the New Testament, in relation to God as well as men. Paul says, "let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: '**That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged.**'" (Rom. 3:4). He writes to Timothy that Jesus Christ was manifest in the flesh, **justified in the Spirit**, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory" (1 Tim. 3:16).

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It is in this second sense that James uses the word "justified" when asking rhetorically, "**Was not Abraham our father justified by works?**" He explains that Abraham's supreme demonstration of justification occurred when he **offered up Isaac** his son on the altar happened many years after his justification by faith recorded in Genesis 15:6. Such a costly act of obedience declared Abraham's faith to all generations.

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Without question or wavering, Abraham rose in obedience to God (Gen. 22:3). 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 could raise Isaac "even from the dead" (Heb. 11:19). He believed in the righteous character of God, that He would never violate either His divine covenant or His holy standards.

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James goes on to explain in verse 22, "**Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?**" It is not that salvation requires faith plus works, but that works are the consequent outgrowth and completion of genuine faith.

"**Fulfilled**" in verse 23 does not refer to a fulfillment of prophecy but rather to **fulfillment of the principle** that justification by faith results in justification by works. And due to his belief and obedience, Abraham was called "the Friend of God". Jesus says this of us when we respond in obedience to Him (John 15:14).

11

Rahab

James 2:25-26

Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way? ²⁶ For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

The second person James uses to illustrate justification by works **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 faithful** (Heb. 11:8, 17, 31) and was even in the human **lineage of Jesus**, being the **great-grandmother of David** (Matt. 1:5).

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Rahab was an innkeeper in Jericho (Joshua 2). 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, and after the officials left, she said to the Israelites, that she knew that the Lord had given them the land. **She had heard of the deeds of the Lord and believed in Him**. She asked the spies to remember and deal kindly with her when they conquered the city.

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Rahab not only acknowledged that the God of Israel was the true Lord, but she obviously trusted in Him. Although she doubtless knew nothing of salvation as Christians understand it, or even as the ancient Israelites understood it, her heart was right before the Lord, and He graciously accepted her faith for righteousness. **He also accepted her protection of the spies as an act of obedience to Him**, and she was therefore **justified by works** when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way. As with Abraham and every other true believer, imputed righteousness based on faith resulted in practical righteousness reflected in good works. Her outward life of faithfulness manifested her inner life of faith.

14

So What ...

James 2:26

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Abraham's and Rahab's justification faith was justified by their works. Their choices declared the outworking for their beliefs. They were committed to the Lord, whatever the cost.

It is in the middle of the great plans, decisions, and crossroads of life—where ambitions, hopes, dreams, destinies, and life itself are at stake. This is where true faith reveals itself. Long before Jesus' crucifixion, Abraham and Rahab were willing to take up their crosses, as it were, and follow Him (Mark 8:34).

It is also in these same situations that false, deceitful faith reveals itself. James notes that just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. He likens dead faith—professed faith without works—to a body without the spirit. Both are useless, devoid of any life-giving power.

What about you? Does your life match your profession?