

**James**  
**Justified by Faith that Works**  
**James 2:20-26**

Let's pray.

Father, I ask that you give us ears to hear all that you're saying to us by your word. For many of us, this is a familiar passage. I pray that your word would be ever fresh and potent in our lives. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Listen to God's word. James 2:20-26 as I read it to you.

*Do you want to be shown a foolish person? That faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and his faith was completed by his works. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. He was called a friend of God. You see, the person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out? But another way. For as the body apart from the spirit, is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

You may be seated.

I'll give you a summary. The passage teaches us very simply that true faith proves itself in action. And whether we're holy men or whether we're sinners, whether we know a little or a lot. Faith proves itself in actions. Now, as you may recall, we're looking at James one and two, and he keeps coming back to the same question what is true religion?

How can we evaluate claims, a religion or religiosity? Now, of course, we know there are a variety of religions that people believe in. In the world. For example, there are quite a few Muslims and Muslims as a whole believe that there is a God. He's one God. And we pleased that God, if we do more good than bad, three times more good than bad.

That's one of the standards they have. So do good and you'll be right with Allah. Now, if I mention Muslims, maybe I should also mention Jews. Jews are very interesting. I speak as someone who's almost half Jewish, so don't take this as a critique of any ethnic group. But I've been to Israel. I know a lot of people who work with Israelites or Jews, and Israel's one of the most secular nations in the world.

It's possible. In fact, many, many people who live in Israel are Jewish and atheistic, Jewish and agnostic. Because Judaism for them is a way of life. It's a culture. It's a series of things that people do. So, what kind of religion do we have when you can adhere to it and be an atheist? The truth of the matter is lots of Buddhists are atheists as well, or agnostics and some Hindus.

Furthermore, it's possible to have a religion that has no connection to faith in a living God at all. Now, if we talk about other religions, then people are evaluating Christianity, of course. And when they do, they kind of watch our way of life even as we watch the way of life of Muslims and Jews and Hindus and Buddhist people watch our way of life.

And they think sometimes that you can find out what Christianity is all about by looking at America, which is the most Christian country in the world according to world opinion. Now, of course, we might scratch our heads and say, please don't do that. Please don't evaluate Christianity in America based on what you know about TV shows and the songs that we sing and so forth, because that's not a representation of Christianity at all.

You think, well, maybe, maybe, Chris, maybe we were a maybe we were a Christian country years ago at the founding. But that day is long past. But the Lord watches it the way we live. The Lord watches, for example, and how we respond to a hurricane. Do we do anything? We have opportunities to give financially to the people who suffered so much from Hurricane Helene, especially in North Carolina and Hurricane Milton just days ago in Florida? What do we do? Do we wish them well, or do we do something to help them out? Do we show our faith in Birmingham? One of the things we celebrate in this coming week is the work that this church does in Birmingham and throughout Alabama and throughout our nation. We try to do things concrete, things like work with schools and found schools, support schools, Christian schools, but also helping out non-Christian schools.

And we start churches and we have campus ministries on dozens of campuses throughout the region and throughout America. We're glad to do that. We have a mercy ministry in James to be very interested in what we actually do, because we have a lot of people here, a lot of resources here. How do we show our faith? Do we show that it's genuine or do we show that it's real?

Now, James asks a very provocative question. In chapter two. He says, who has real faith? What do our deeds show about our faith? And he says it as provocatively as possible, because he knew that even as he wrote that there were people who knew the teaching of the Apostle Paul, that we're saved or justified by faith apart from works.

That's Romans chapter three. And James says here a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. I'm going to give you a forecast because somebody asked me this question. I was at the gym this week and one of the wonderful people at Briarwood who goes to the same gym as I do, said Dan, I've been reading the book of James. You got to tell me what it means. I said, well, come to church on Sunday because I'm working out right now. Now, I told them very briefly. I told them briefly. I said, look, the basic idea is very simple. The word justified, like so many words in every language, has two meanings. One is to be declared right or in the right by God. With God, that's the main meaning, but a secondary meaning. It's actually pretty common means to vindicate or give proof or demonstrate something. And that's how James is using the word. Now, you may be one of those people that consults various translations of the Bible. And you read the ESV and it says, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

You think, well, maybe another translation will make it easier. I have to tell you, there's no help from other translations. They're all they're all just as bad or just as shocking. For example, the NIV says a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. So it goes from justified by works to justified by what he does.

It's the same idea. Behold, Paul says that one is justified by faith apart from works. And now James says, we're justified in some other sense of the word by works. What does he mean? He means to identify what genuine faith is as opposed to mere words. Because orthodox words are not enough. Real faith works. It obeys. It helps widows and orphans in their distress.

It meets the needs of those who are poor and those who are hungry. False religion, James said in chapter two offers kind wishes. It meets someone who's hungry and says you should eat something, meet someone who's not protected from the elements, and said, you know, you should buy a coat. In fact, you should probably try to find a house if you would.

Well, false. Religion is full of kind words and no deeds. False religion takes religion classes, false religion studies, the creeds. And what people said about Christianity long ago. False religion knows about Jesus. True religion knows Jesus and does a study the creeds. It believes the creeds, affirms the creeds with heart, soul, mind and strength. That's what real faith does.

Now James gives us four instances, four cases by which we can ascertain if somebody has true faith or not. And we saw two of them last week to this week. Last week we saw that there is a person who says, I have faith, but does nothing to help the man or woman, the child right in front of them who was hungry, thirsty and poorly clothed does nothing.

Real faith helps our neighbor. False faith does nothing for a neighbor, and false faith has no value in its theology. Last week we saw that James says the demons have Orthodox theology. They believe that God is one, that he's powerful. He's the judge of all the earth, and it doesn't no good. It terrifies them because they don't trust in God.

This week, we see that Abraham demonstrated that his faith is real by doing something extraordinarily difficult, a very hard obedience and a quick obedience. And so real faith expresses itself toward God. And then Rahab is the last example, quite a surprise that across the two, who only shows up for a few verses in the Bible, would show up as an example of real faith.

But she showed her faith by taking care of Israelites when they came to her city. And we'll study that together in a few moments. Now, what James says in verse 20 and 21 is that faith without deeds is useless. And it says in the next verse that Abraham proved this faith was real when he offered his son Isaac on the altar.

Most of you know this story, but I'm going to tell it to you again. Many years ago, God told Abraham that he would become the father of many nations, that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore, and that through him the nations of the earth would be blessed. And he heard this, and he trusted it. But he knew that in order to give his blessing through his progeny to the nations, he had to have a child. And he didn't have a child. God promised him even a child. When he was 75. His wife was 65. In those days, people tended to live to be about 120 or so, sometimes a little bit longer. And if you think about the ratios, if that's the case, 75 is to 120, kind of like 57 or 56 year old man and a woman, maybe 47 or 46 and 54. And, you know, it's barely possible that someone would have their first child at the age of 54 and 46. In fact, I have friends who had their first child when they were the man was 51 and the woman was 46. Extremely rare, but maybe humanly possible. Well, God said, let me make sure it's clear that I gave you this child.

Let me wait about ten years, 15, 20, 25 years until it's completely hopeless. Humanly speaking. And so Abraham did not have a child and shared an average child to their 190 years old, respectively. But in the middle of that waiting period, actually ten years in one day in Genesis chapter 15, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, Abraham, I am your shield and your great reward. And Abraham talked back to God. We might say he was churlish, maybe even he chided God. He said, look, if you're my shield and my great

reward, where's the very first reward you promised me a child. I'm 85 years old now. Where's that child you promised me? And God said, let's go outside. Because evidently it was inside. And he went outside and he said, would you please look at the stars?

Now, when we look at the stars today in Birmingham, in my neighborhood, at least, there's lights everywhere. People have their street lights and their porch lights. And when you go outside on a clear night, if you try really hard, you can see 37 stars. And upon more careful examination, you realize five of them are planes and one is the space lab.

You just happen to look at the right time.

But in those days, there was no light pollution. He lived in the desert. It's kind of like being on top of a high mountain today. And in those days when you went outside to look at the stars, they were dazzling in their thousands. You beheld the entire Milky Way. And God said, look at the stars. So numerous shall your offspring be.

And Abraham looked at the stars and believed God in Genesis 15 and Romans three. And James says he believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, that the moment he believed, looking at the evidence that his body, Romans says, was as good as dead. And he hadn't had a child all these years, and yet he believed God would give him a child.

And he was right with God, even though he waited another 15 years for his child to arrive. And then the child did arrive. Isaac. He was 100, Sarah was 90. And then the child grew. And we don't know how old Isaac was. In Genesis 22 when God said, I want you to offer your child to me. He had to be old enough to help his father with the project, and old enough to ask the right question.

So he had to be at, I'm going to say, at least ten. He might have been 12, 14, 15. We don't know. But God said, I want you to take that child. And now, by the way, let's say he was 12. Now Abraham is 112 years old and Sarah's 102 years old. And if it was impossible of a child before, certainly now.

And God said, I want you to offer your son to me on the Mount, and I'll show you. Genesis 22 says that Abraham got up early the next day. He immediately obeyed and went up the mountain. And even as he took those terrible steps up the mountain to offer his Son to God, he still had faith. He told the servants at one point, stay behind, stay here, and we will come back to you.

And Hebrews comments on this in chapter 11 and says that Abraham believed that if necessary, God would raise his child from the dead. That's why he could say we will come back. He believed that God would keep his promise, and in that way, James says, he completed his faith. His faith was perfected or completed or brought to completion by this radical act of obedience that proved that his faith was not just words.

He had it deep within him. It demonstrated the life of his faith. Now there's a man, a scholar named slaughter, who lived about heyday was sort of 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s. A German man, an evangelical in a day when it was hard to be evangelical in Germany. And he wrote this about faith 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, gives me God's grace, and is my righteousness before God. If faith

gave me merely words, then it would be useful to say, I have faith. But that is a sinister thought. Is that all?

I am a thinker and a talker. God has given me life. Then that means he has planted in me a will that can act and must act with unalterable necessity. Service to God is action. I should thank God that I can act as one who trusts in quotation. This quotation actually would have applied to me when I was a teenager, because I went to church every week, because I was required to do so, and I knew the words of the hymns because they entered my mind week by week.

And I would say the creed because I was required to do so. But I didn't believe it. I could say the right words. I did say the right words with an unbelieving heart, and it was worthless to me. Now, works are not the ground of God's grace, but works are grounded in God's grace. If we really believe, we show it tangibly.

That's what James is saying in chapter two. Look at it again, verse 24. It says that Abraham is justified by works. It doesn't mean he earned salvation by works. It means that Abraham was declared righteous, re-declared righteous. We might say his claim to believe in God was vindicated, proved in the external world when he offered his son Isaac on the altar.

I'm going to give you an illustration that I wasn't sure I would. I would give, but I'm giving it. It's a little bit of a long one, slightly complicated, slightly sad. But every friend is a tank commander, he said. Use this illustration and it has to do with tanks. And the illustration goes like this. In the aftermath of the events of nine over 11, the United States told the Taliban they had a choice. They could expel those who rained fire on our nation, or they could reap the consequences. And the Taliban said, bring it on. And so we brought it on, but we brought it on in phases. The first phase was we decided we would wage America, decided we would wage an air campaign, and then we could defeat the Taliban through the air. The problem was that the Taliban had tanks and you can't fight tanks. So it seems from the air and the people we called freedom fighters, this is, you know, around 2000, three, 4 or 5, you know, three, four and five. The freedom fighters did not have tanks and they were being blasted the pieces by the Taliban tanks. Eventually United States said, we're going to do something about these tanks. And they said, we're going to put spotters on the ground, and we're going to paint the tanks with lasers that are better than the lasers I use, or you use. And then when people want to. Minimize the force of the tanks. How about that from euphemism when they want to, stop the tanks from blasting the freedom fighters? We're going to drop bombs from the sky and hit the tanks. And then one day, there were some freedom fighters being obliterated by five Taliban tanks. And there was heavy cloud cover everywhere. And there was an F-15 with these missiles far above the earth, completely impossible to see what was going on down below. And the spotters pointed their lasers at the tanks and they said, drop one weapon. One weapon fell from the sky and hit the first tank squarely. And that was the end of that tank. And then they said, here's the second tank, and down came the missile, and there goes a second tank, two, three, 4 or 5 tanks. And then the Taliban said, we're done fighting with tanks because you can fight when you've got missiles falling from the sky.

Now, we would say that that event justified the American decision to have a war from the air, and it justified those who said, we have a weapon system that can allow us to neutralize tanks, and it's going to cost millions of dollars, but it's worth it. It's going to work. And when it worked, it justified the confidence that the Pentagon put in those weapons.

I'm using the word justified, that is to say, vindicated gave proof. And that's the way in which James is speaking. He's saying that we give proof that our faith is real. Abraham gave proof that he was a friend of God on a blessing. It stated many times in the Bible all that he was a friend of God when he offered his son Isaac and friends, your faith should do the same.

Your faith should express itself by deeds. What do you love? Our faith expresses itself because we express it. We love by our deeds. If you love cameras, you're going to find a way to buy a new camera. If you really want one, and you're going to find a way to take pictures. And if you love fishing, you will find free time in your schedule to go fishing.

This is why we let our finances and our various records get out of order, because we don't love keeping our finances and our records in order. Some of you do. Most of you don't. And we don't love to do dishes, so the dishes pile up. But if you do love tending your garden, if you do love playing golf, if you do love playing with your children or grandchildren, whoever it may be, your friends.

You do what you love. And if you love God, it proves itself in your deeds. It's inexorable. You don't have to be exhorted to do what you love. It comes out of you. If you love God, you know, show you love God by taking him out for a cup of coffee. That's not an option. If you love God, you show it by your deeds, shows by.

But the deeds that demonstrate that you love his ways. And so just put a simple question to you right now. What are you thinking of at this moment? What acts of love are expressing themselves in your life? Or what acts of love could express themselves more? Or maybe you're thinking, oh, there's an area where I'm not obeying God and I'm not showing my faith by my deeds.

I simply leave it between you and the Lord to sort that out. But deeds do demonstrate our faith. Now, for a second time, I have a little chart for you that describes the way faith and work works together. The first one is number one is paganism or the false legalistic religions of the world. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and various other religions through the ages. The gods will be pleased if we do more good than bad, and you'll be right with God, and you will live with God's reward. That's paganism or anti-Christian religions. Number two is a Christian mistake, and that is that if you believe and you do, works, sufficient works and God will be pleased and you'll be with him forever. Now, it's not entirely wrong.

It's a Christian mistake. Number three is so much better. We say, if you believe in the Lord, you will be saved. That's a Bible statement. And so we think, oh, that's got to be it. Faith leads to salvation. When I trust in Jesus that I'm saved. And that's close. But what the Bible actually teaches is that faith leads to salvation. And when we're saved, when we're right with God, when we love God, we inevitably, inexorably produce good works that follow not in order to be right with God, but because we're right with God, not in order to gain God's favor, but because we have a relationship with him. Then then works will spring from us in our relationships at work, at work.

We have temptations. I gotta make a profit. I got to make some sales. Can I cut some corners? Can I shade the truth just a little bit about my product? Can I exaggerate what it can do? Can I promise more than maybe I can deliver? We think, yeah, I gotta do that now. The faith, our faith proves itself on Monday.

We profess our faith on Sunday it proves itself Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday it proves itself Saturday to in every relationship we have in our conversations, the way we treat the people around us or friends or coworkers.

Paul says we're justified by faith alone, James says, but real faith is never alone. Paul says we are justified by faith apart from works. And James says, yes, yes, but works always follow. No one is saved by works, but no one is saved without works. That's what the Bible says. The second example we have is Rahab. Very interesting case.

You know, we have Abraham, who's a hero of the faith. He's a man is a patriarch. He's wealthy. Everything is going for him. Of course, he's an example of faith. And we have Rahab, and we think that's an odd example. She's a Canaanite, an outsider. She's a woman. She's a woman. Probably young, probably poor, certainly living a life of sin. She's a prostitute. And yet she also is chosen by James as an example of a living faith. And her stories perhaps don't do as well. It was time for the Israelites, after their years of wandering, to take the Promised Land, and they sent scouts. James calls them messengers, Scouts into the land of Canaan, and the scouts went first of all to Jericho, one of the first cities you would encounter, and armed and walled and fortified city and they went to a logical place. They went to her house because it was on a city wall and she was a prostitute. So people come and go. They thought, well, we'll just go to this house where people come and go and it's right there and we'll be safe. But they weren't safe. The king knew about them and sent word to Rahab and said, I understand there are Hebrew spies in your house.

And she said, well, they there were. But they left another way. She hid them on the roof and sent her own armies out another way. Now what that means is that she said the right things about God, but she also acted on here's her words. Her words are these in Joshua 29:2-11,

*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. Now fear is one thing, but she says, it's not just that I'm afraid of God. She says, the Lord is God of heaven. The Lord is God in heaven. He's the Lord. And then by protecting the scouts, she said, And I'm on the side of the Lord, not on the side of my gods.*

I'm on the side of the Hebrews, the Israelites, not on the side of my own people. And by that transfer of loyalty demonstrated by her act of saving the spies lives, she proved that her faith was real. She had something before her to do. She did the right thing at the right time. By God's grace. And that's what real faith does.

Let me give you a contrast. Some years ago, people were recommending a book to me called Waiting for Snow in Havana, and about the fifth time somebody recommended it to me, I said, okay, I'll read it. And it's a book written by a man named Carlos, who is a believer who was for many years. I think he just retired as a professor at Harvard University. He wrote many books, books about Christianity. he might not agree with us on all points of doctrine, but he claims to be a Christian. He wrote this book about his childhood growing up in Havana. His father, Carlos, was a judge. And then Castro took power in 1959. And Carlos here, the father, the judge, knew people. And he said, Castro is up to no good. This is before the firing squads, before private property was liberated. He could just tell Castro is up to no good, and he knew that he should get out of there, leave the country. But he had a good life. He was a prominent person. He had property. He had wealth. He didn't want to go to Miami, where he'd been nobody, where he would no longer be a judge.

He'd probably have to do menial work. He thought, I'm going to wait as long as I can, and I'll leave at the last minute. And he waited and waited, waited and waited until it was too late. At the last instant he got his two sons, Carlos and his brother, on a plane, wearing nothing but the clothes they had on their backs, and they escaped penniless, without friends, without relatives in America.

And mom and dad had to stay behind. Now that demonstrates how useless, how feckless it is to know the right thing, to do nothing about it. He knew he had to get out of there. He knew that Castro was up to no good, and he did nothing. And so his knowledge was useless. If you know something, if you really know it, you act on it. You get out of the country.

What's James up to? James is talking about real faith. And while Paul, when he says were justified by faith apart from works, is talking to Gentiles who wonder, do I have to become a Jew? Do I have to follow the food laws? Paul says, no, no, no, no, you're saved by faith alone. You have to do any works.

You don't have to. You don't have to stop being a Greek. And become a Jew and get circumcised and all the rest. Just believe in Jesus. That's who Paul's talking to. You're justified by faith. But then James has these people who know their theology, who you say, you know, the kind of person who says, well, my faith is my private affair. Nothing is showing. Paul is addressing spiritual athletes who want to do a great series of deeds and climb to heaven. Paul's addressing a man like John Wesley. I told you about him last week. I told you John Wesley was ordained in the Church of England at an early age, in his mid-twenties, 1727, and became a missionary to the New World. He went to Georgia. Didn't go well. I told that last week, too, and he went back to America. And as he was going back, there was a great storm at sea and his little boat was rocking back and forth, and everybody went down to the hold and the waves are swelling and the boat is leaking and people are thinking they're going to die.

But while he's on one side of the boat as an ordained minister in terror of death, there are some people Moravians, missionaries, the great missionaries of the day. The Moravians were on the other side of the boat singing, and he went over to them and said to them, how can you sing on the day when you may die?

And they said, if we go down, we will go up and be with our Lord. And he wrote in his diary, how can they know that? What more have they done than I have done? And Wesley did a lot. They get up at four in the morning to pray. He went to the hospitals, he visited the sick. He did everything he could possibly do, but he was resting in his works.

Now, in God's grace, he came to a real and full conversion. A little bit later, when he got off the boat, he decided to go a few days later to a worship service at night. And I don't recommend this, but at that worship service he attended, the pastor was reading a 220 year old sermon. Now we'll say it was a good sermon. It was a sermon by Martin Luther introducing the book of Romans. And as Luther's words were describing salvation by faith or grace alone, Wesley says, I felt my heart strangely warmed, and I believed that even I was right with God not by my works, but by faith. That's who Paul writes to anyone here or anywhere who thinks, how do I get right with God?

What do I need to do in order to be right with God? Here's the message of Wesley. Here's the Westminster Confession of Faith. It says justification is an act of God's free grace, by which he pardons all our sins and reckons us as righteous in his sight on the basis of the work of Christ and Christ alone. And James says, so you say you have faith.

Prove it, prove it. Like Abraham, who proved his faith by heart, obedience by Rahab, who proved her faith with a hard allegiance to God and his people. Let me give another example from the life of Carlos. There. So when Carlos was a boy living at home, his parents were prosperous. They had all the money they needed. His mother noticed that he had certain toys, especially toy soldiers.

She knew how many she gave and the stock of his toy soldiers kept growing, even though mom and dad did not take him to buy more toys, she knew that he had no money and that mom and dad had not bought him anything. And so she asked, what have you done? And eventually he confessed, I've been stealing toys from the toy shop.

And they rebuked him and correct. And I said, that's not how we behave. That's we don't steal. We don't need to steal, we don't steal. That's not who we are. And he kept stealing and stealing. And finally they got a new idea. They said, we're going to take our son to the shopkeeper, and we're going to have him give his toys back and tell the shopkeeper what he had done and confess and ask to be forgiven.

And it changed him. He never stole again, even when he was in Cuba. Remember, with his brother and nobody else and no allies eating one meal a day, living in a home for juvenile delinquents. Because that's all they could find. They weren't delinquents. That's all there was. And they had a chance to steal some food and have two meals in a day.

And he said, we can't do it to honor our father and our mother, who taught us not to steal, to rely on God. We're not going to do it. That's what real faith does. It changes. It resists temptation. It exercises itself. And so the question goes to us, what does your life say about you? What are you thinking right now?

What aspect of your life are you evaluating and appraising? Are you able to say, by God's grace, I have been shaped by the gospel. I've been formed by the gospel. And yes, not to my credit, but to God's credit. I am doing something. I am living a life of costly obedience, and maybe I need to live in more obedience, examine myself further to ask, what am I doing here?

What am I doing in my life? How am I tending my relationships and my responsibilities? Active faith unites us to God who justifies us because we're united to Christ. Good deeds flow from us freely and continually. It's my prayer that all of you trust in Christ. Sincerely, and that it shows itself in words, yes, and deeds in heart, obedience and joyful obedience. Now and always.

Let's pray.

Heavenly father, I thank you for this word. I thank you also for the good work you do in our lives. I thank you for the way James challenges us. Paul comforts us in James challenges us, and Lord, we need both. And so Lord, we give our lives, our hopes, our prayers to you, our desire to obey and ask you for the strength to do so. Help us, Lord, even now, as we sing our closing hymn to seal our faith, to declare our faith, even in the words of this song, guide me old, our great Jehovah, oh great Lord, guide us.

We pray in Jesus name.

Amen.