

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 2:21–26

February 6, 2013

Introduction

As we continue to look at the issue of faith and works, we need to remind ourselves of what James has already established in verses 14–20. First of all, we know that he is addressing a group of people who have all professed to be believers. Some in this group have given evidence of their faith by doing good works. Others have made a made an empty profession of faith, perhaps even asserting some orthodox beliefs. In this way, James has shown that there are two *kinds* of faith: a real, genuine faith which produces works; and a fake, false faith which lacks works. He demonstrated that the kind of faith which lacks works is unprofitable, useless, and dead!

Test #4: A Living Faith and Good Works (2:14–26)

Remember, this is a test which we must apply to ourselves individually. We need to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5). A living faith *must* produce good works in order to be proved genuine. Similarly, a dead faith which claims to have faith, but lacks works will be proven false. James will now illustrate this for us through the examples of an Old Testament man and an Old Testament woman.

Examples of Works that Demonstrated a Living Faith (vv. 21–26)

James illustrates his point that faith without works is dead through the use of two Old Testament examples. In each case, the man or woman was initially saved at some point *prior* to the good work which James describes.

Abraham (vv. 21–24)

For each of these examples, it will be instructive to look at the events in their original context. The account of Abraham offering his son Isaac on the altar is in Genesis 22:1–18.

The Timing of Abraham's Initial Justification (vv. 21, 23)

James is careful to point out a good work which does *not* precede or fall in conjunction with the point at which Abraham was initially saved. Notice some events from the timeline of his life:

<u>Passage</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>What Occurred</u>
Gen 12:5	75	Abraham left his father's house by faith (Heb 11:8)
Gen 15:6	86	Abraham believed God; it was accounted to him for righteousness (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6).
Gen 21:5	100	Isaac born
Gen 22	~115	Abraham offered Isaac on the altar (note v. 12)

From these events, we can clearly see that roughly 40 years had passed since Abraham believed God, and it was 30 years since God's declaration in Genesis 15:6. So what actually happened in Genesis 22?

The Perfecting of Faith (v. 22)

When Abraham offered his son Isaac on the altar, he was doing a good work. In doing so, James tells us that Abraham's faith was completed or perfected. His faith and works were cooperating together to obtain their goal: progressive sanctification.

The Distinction between Initial and Subsequent Justification (vv. 23–24)

James is also careful to note here that Abraham's justification by works was not the initial point of salvation. Abraham believed God much earlier and had been declared righteous much earlier in life. When James says "the Scripture was fulfilled," the statement made earlier in Genesis 15:6 was confirmed. This was the proof that Abraham was rightly related to God. So again we can see that James is using the same term in a different way than Paul. For example:

- Paul — justify = declared righteous (Rom 3:20, 24, 28; 4:2; 5:1)
- James — justify = proven righteous (Jas 2:21, 24, 25)

But also notice that in both Genesis 15:6 and 22:12, it is *God* who is the one who is justifying Abraham. God is always the one who justifies a person, never the person himself.

Conclusion from Abraham (v. 24)

James concludes his example by denying that faith alone saves. Literally, the *kind* of faith that is alone cannot justify or save!

A Note on Works vs. Good Works

At this point, we should be careful to define what a *good* work is. James says that Abraham was justified on the basis of a good work: offering Isaac on the altar. But Paul declares that a person is not justified according to the works of the law (Gal 2:16) or any other works for that matter (Eph 2:9). The example of Abraham is very helpful because it defines for us what a good work is. Think about the event described.

Why would Abraham follow God's command to kill his dearly beloved son on an altar? After all, fathers have a very great love for their children and would not want harm to come to them, much less death! The only answer is that Abraham loved God more than he loved Isaac — and he loved Isaac very greatly indeed!

Also, why would Abraham proceed to nearly kill his son Isaac, when Isaac was the child of promise? Hebrews 11:17–19 answers this question for us. Abraham was willing to kill Isaac because he believed that God would raise him back to life.

And so you can see that Abraham was motivated by faith in God and love for God when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. This provides us with a definition of a good work.

Definition: *A good work is anything a believer does in obedience to God's word, motivated by faith and love for God.*

So then how do we distinguish between works and good works? Consider the following example:

Person A is a *believer*, goes to church, sings in the choir, is kind and gentle toward others, helps out by serving in the kitchen, and contributes to the poor.

Person B is an *unbeliever*, but also goes to church, sings in the choir, is kind and gentle toward others, helps out by serving in the kitchen, and contributes to the poor.

While both people are doing exactly the same activities from a human perspective, only person A is motivated from a heart of faith and love toward God. Therefore, while person B is engaged in works, only person A is actually doing any *good* works!

Rahab (vv. 25–26)

James also provides us with an example of a woman who was justified in the same manner as Abraham. The term “likewise” means that Rahab’s justification follows the same pattern of a good work which occurred sometime *after* her initial point of justification. The events mentioned by James took place in Joshua 2.

The Timing of Rahab’s Initial Justification (v. 25)

Rahab mentions several things that could put the moment of her initial conversion years before her encounter with the spies. She mentions the Red Sea crossing (40 years earlier) along with the defeat of Sihon and Og (during the wilderness wanderings). Her testimony in Joshua 2:9–11 covers most of the wilderness wanderings and revealed that because of these great miracles, she had come to fear the One True God.

When she aided the spies and obeyed their words, she was spared from the destruction that fell upon Jericho. Hebrews 11:31 tells us that she was motivated by faith when she helped the spies escape.

Conclusion from Rahab (v. 26)

James concludes this section by comparing dead faith to a dead body. A body which has been deprived of a spirit shows no signs of life. Likewise a faith which does not produce works shows no signs of being a living, genuine faith.

Conclusion

Both Abraham and Rahab are examples for us of how a living faith is evidenced by good works. Their righteous standing was confirmed or justified by God based on their works. But remember, whether it’s their initial justification (faith) or their subsequent justification (works) — in neither case was the justification produced by mere men. God is the one who justifies!

This passage should also stir our minds about the recent teaching of “easy believism” that is popular in many evangelical circles today. This often comes up when someone is clinging to the hope that the childhood profession of another person was enough to make him a genuine believer. Deathbed professions might also fall in this category. This doesn’t mean God can’t save a person at the end of his life. Just look at the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43). But we need to be careful not to assign living faith to someone whose faith is really dead! ~AWB