

In the Court of Public Opinion

Faith Works! - Part 3

James 2:21-24

Introduction

So far, in the letter by James, we've discovered two kinds of faith: dead faith and demonic faith.

We can define dead faith as faith without works. We can define demonic faith as words without faith.

To illustrate dead faith, James took us into a worship service and showed us the pious reaction of people in the assembly to some poor, destitute believers. Without providing any help at all, they simply said, "God bless you – now be warmed and filled". (As if their blessing could take the place of a good meal)

James is making the point that **faith which does not work is a faith that really doesn't work!**ⁱ It is nothing more than words without meaning.

Then James moves on to describe demonic faith – a faith that has all the right answers on the Bible exam but not the right heart. It knows the answers, but it doesn't know the Author, and James shocked his Jewish world by telling them that the Devil and his demons have their religious facts straight.ⁱⁱ

It was as shocking to them as it is to us to discover that demons actually have faith?ⁱⁱⁱ There is no such thing as an atheistic or agnostic demon. A demon never wonders if the Bible is telling the truth; they have seen its prophecies come true throughout the ages, and they know the final stages

of human history, recorded in the Book of Revelation, will come true.

James' point is that it isn't enough to know **about** the truth— you must personally **accept** the truth.

A few weeks ago I visited a man in an intensive care unit. His daughter and son-in-law are members of Colonial, but he, for years, was a Christian Scientist. Christian Scientists deny the deity of Christ and His atonement on the cross for sin. They believe in a universal salvation and that no final judgment awaits mortals.^{iv}

And now this man lay in the final stages of cancer, having courageously battled it for two years. His daughter and son-in-law were hoping and praying that he would have ears to hear the gospel, so they asked him if I could visit him, and he agreed. I had asked the nurse if I could come later that evening when I knew he'd be alone and she— a believer—knew my intentions and told me she'd clear the way.

When I returned after 9:00 that night, we were uninterrupted for nearly an hour, and this dear man listened attentively to the gospel. It was the exact opposite of what he'd believed for years, of course.

I couldn't help but sense the urgency of this hour—little did either of us know that in six days he was going to die. Nothing I said was new to him . . . he'd watched the lives of his kids . . . he knew the words . . . but he had never trusted in Christ,

believing that He was indeed the Son of God, who's cross-work was sufficient for his sins.

When I finished explaining the gospel, I asked him what he wanted to do about it. He said he wanted to think about all I'd said. I prayed for him and left, but not before telling him to make sure he told his family if and when he decided to accept the claims of Christ.

Five days later—one day before he died, he informed his family that Jesus Christ now lived in his heart—he had accepted the gospel of Christ! His funeral, held here in our Chapel, was two days ago.

It's one thing to acknowledge the existence of Christ – it's another thing to accept Christ as the living sovereign Lord and Savior.

It's one thing to acknowledge the truth – it's another thing to accept *the One who is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6)*

Think of it, for all of eternity, that man's acceptance—the day before he died—made all the difference between an eternity in hell or an eternity in heaven.

Who knows, but that today may be your final opportunity to hear the gospel, place your trust in the Living Lord, and give your life to Him.

Demonic faith knows the creeds but will never surrender to Christ. James informs us that the demons even tremble at the implications of the gospel, but they **will not** and, now in their confirmed unholy state—they **cannot** surrender to Christ!

What about you? Do you have faith?

Is it nothing more than dead faith—accurate words without personal meaning?

Is it demonic faith—acknowledgment of the truth without personal acceptance?

You see, James is giving us a tour of three faiths in chapter two of his letter, where I invite your attention.

But only one of the three is genuine.

- **Dead faith** affects only the mind—it intellectually knows the words, but that's it.
- **Demonic faith** affects the mind and the emotions—*even the demons believe that—and shudder. (James 2:19)*

But now James will illustrate for us a third kind of faith – it is **dynamic faith**.

1. **Dynamic faith** affects the mind and the emotions—but most importantly in this context—it affects the will.

Dynamic Faith

Suppose you had an incurable disease and I told you there was a doctor in California who had developed a cure. Suppose I got you a book he'd written that described perfectly your condition. In it he outlined the plan and gave the promise that it would cure you if you submitted to his care.

And I asked you later, "*Did you read his book?*"

"Man, I memorized portions of it. My name was written all over that book—it was like he knew me inside and out!"

"Do you believe he can cure you?"

"Absolutely!"

"So when are you going to California to submit to his program?"

"I don't know about that . . . I don't like to fly . . . how about I just keep reading his book?"

I believe it's true, just don't interrupt my life!

You see, genuine faith in Christ goes beyond admission and acknowledgment into acceptance, and James is emphasizing that the genuine item will ultimately be seen in action.

To illustrate his point, James, as you know, has provided a picture for each of these three kinds of faiths.

For dynamic faith he describes life of someone his Jewish audience would immediately identify with—Father Abraham.

Take a look at **James 2:21**.

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22. You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23. 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. 24. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

This happens to be the portion of James letter that became such an irritation to Martin Luther, the Reformer.

He was so adamantly opposed to the Roman Catholic dogma of salvation through works, and such a strong defender of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, that he missed the point of James here and ended up calling the entire letter, “an epistle of straw”.^v

But on closer inspection, it becomes clear that James has something different in mind.

Let me recommend that you write into the margin of your Bible two references.

Look back at *verse 21* where James writes, ***Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?***

In the margin of your Bible, next to that verse, write ***Genesis 22***.

Genesis 22 is the chapter where we’re given the full account of Abraham preparing to offer Isaac as a burnt offering in obedience to God’s command.

Now look at what James writes in *verse 23*. ***And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”*** (this is a quote from *Genesis 15*).

So, next to verse 23, write into the margin of your Bible, ***Genesis 15***.

The Apostle Paul will use this same quote from Genesis 15 to prove that justification is by faith apart from works. (***Romans 4***)

But James uses this verse from Genesis 15 to show that justification is not by faith alone.

So who’s right? James or Paul?

There’s no need to wonder . . . they both happen to be right!

They are looking at Abraham’s life with two different perspectives.

Keep in mind that there is such a thing as justification in the eyes of God and that is by faith. But there is also justification in the eyes of mankind and that is by works. They can’t see your faith. But they can see your works.

There are two sides to the coin of justification.

In fact, there are two general meanings of this word, justified—*dikaioo* (δικαίωω).

1. A legal declaration of being righteous.

This is the way Paul most often used the word. He wrote;

- ***we are justified as a gift by God’s grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24);***
- ***having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1)***

This is the forensic, legal pronouncement whereby the believer is declared right – or righteous before God. He is literally acquitted by the Divine judge of the universe in the courtroom of Divine holiness and justice.

That’s one side of justification – in the court of God’s opinion. The second meaning is...

2. A vindication before men.^{vi}

This is justification—vindication—in the court of public opinion.^{vii}

In God’s court, justification takes place in a moment. In the court of public opinion, it takes place every moment. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail.

So, depending on which side of the coin you happen to be emphasizing, you can either promote the significance of faith—justification before God; or the significance of works—justification before mankind.

And by the way, both the Apostle Paul and the Apostle James illustrate their particular side of the coin with the same life—the life of Abraham.

They even use the same verse from Genesis 15—***Abraham believed God and it was counted—reckoned—to him as righteousness.***

But I want you to understand that Paul uses the verse to prove the fact that Abraham was justified before he ever did anything for God.

The Apostle James will use the life of Abraham to prove the fact that what Abraham did for God proved he really belonged to Him.

Paul is emphasizing the root of salvation; James is emphasizing the fruit of salvation.^{viii}

In fact, look down at *verse 22 again*. ***You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected.***

Faith was working – the word is *sunerge* – which gives us the word *synergy*. There is a synergy between faith and works.

And James says that Abraham's faith was perfected. That word perfected is James favorite word that speaks of "maturity".

And did you notice how James began *verse 22*? James writes – *You see!* Look at him . . . could Abraham offer up Isaac without having matured in his faith?

In other words, everybody could see that Abraham had grown up in his faith by the time he got to Genesis 22 and offered up Isaac to God.

It had been 50 years of growth . . . and now it's playing out in the court of public opinion on that mountain ridge of Moriah.

Can I take you there for a few minutes? It is arguably the greatest act of faith by any human being on the planet. No wonder it would become a type of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on that same ridge of hills.

But before we watch Abraham raise the knife to take the life of his son—believing it would result in the resurrection of his son Isaac (Hebrews 11:19); before we climb with Abraham and Isaac up Moriah's hill—that same ridge where God will later keep His promise and provide a Lamb; before that, look at the path of Abraham's faith—**it's one stepping stone after another.**

Hebrews 11 actually says that Abraham first demonstrated faith back in *Genesis 12* when he left his home—but it isn't until *Genesis 15* where we're told point-blank that Abraham believed the covenant promise.

In fact, *Genesis 15* is the first time in the Bible the word "believe" appears in scripture.^{ix}

Although *Hebrews 11* tells us:

- that Abraham left home by faith (v. 8);
- that he lived as a foreigner in another land by faith (v. 9)
- that he offered up Isaac by faith (v. 17)

The definitive moment of belief is said to have been in *Genesis 15* when Abraham rested everything on God's word and he believed God.

We're not told if Abraham believed God immediately, went out and thought about it, or prayed about it for a while—we're not told.

But we are told that Abraham believed in God by faith.

But that doesn't mean from that point forward, Abraham lived a perfectly godly life.

The life of failure is not a life of perfection—it's a life of progression.

The Progression is sometimes forward—sometimes backward, like the time when Abraham lied about his wife being his sister to save his own neck. In that particular court of public opinion, Abraham was faithless.

But near the end of his life – after 50 years of growing, leaning, confessing, and maturing Abraham was given the greatest test of faith any living human being was ever given. Fortunately God didn't test Abraham on Mount Moriah earlier in life.

One author said that Abraham's life was really nothing more than a series of surrenders to God.^x

Leading up to this great surrender . . .

- He was first told to surrender his father and the only life he'd every known in a land called Ur
- He then was put into a position where he had to surrender the well-watered plains of Jordan to his nephew Lot
- He was later told to surrender Hagar and their son Ishmael and that Ishmael would not be the son of the covenant promise
- Then, nearly 50 years after the original promise of a son through whom a nation would come that would bless the nations of the world—primarily because through that Jewish nation the Messiah would come—here comes God, 50 years later to tell Abraham to surrender his grown son Isaac as a sacrifice to God

And when God came to speak to Abraham—who was now more than 100 years old—it was a conversation without loopholes.

God said, "*Abraham, take now your son, your only son; the son whom you love, Isaac.*" (*Genesis 22:2*)

Do you think Abraham was hard of hearing or slow? No, but he was stubborn.

Abraham, take now your son

Abraham could have said, "I have two sons"

No, take your only son

Okay, but Ishmael and Isaac are the only son of their mother— technically . . .

No, take the one whom you love

Well, I do love Ishmael too

Abraham, take now your son, your only son, the one whom you love – Isaac!

End of conversation! ^{xi}

James will say to us, “Go watch Abraham on Mount Moriah and tell me – is that the greatest vindication of a man’s faith or what?!”

God had promised Abraham a child when he was 75 and Sarah was 65. Life expectancy was 120 years, so there was still a chance Abraham and Sarah might have a child of their own; time passed and slim chances dwindled to none. Ten years after the initial promise, God told Abraham, “***I am your shield, and your very great reward.***” (*Genesis 15:1*) Abraham retorted in essence saying, “***Then why am I still waiting for a son?***” (*Genesis 15:2*)^{xii}

God told Abraham to go outside and look up at the sky and just try to count the stars.

In the city, we can see perhaps 100 stars on a clear night, then on closer inspection, 7 of them are airplanes and 3 are satellites.^{xiii}

But not for Abraham on that clear, dry and dark night; and he believed God.

Then he waited another 14 years. The life of faith wasn’t paying up . . . the prospects were now impossible.

Reminds me of an incident I read that occurred just before the Civil War.

A wealthy farmer named Worthy Taylor hired a young man named James, or Jim, as they called him, to work on the farm. During that summer Jim and Taylor’s daughter fell in love and Jim asked Mr. Taylor for her hand in marriage. To which Worthy Taylor told Jim he had no money and no prospects to provide for her . . . and the answer was no. Thirty five years went by and Worthy Taylor’s farm grew to the point where he needed a new and larger barn. As the old barn was being dismantled, Taylor saw a rafter that had been above the hayloft where Jim had slept that summer. Jim had carved his name in that rafter – James A. Garfield – who just so happened to be serving at that very moment as the President of the United States.

In a very real sense, everyone around Abraham and Sarah, and Abraham and Sarah too, no doubt,

viewed the promise of God like Worthy Taylor viewed young Jim Garfield—no prospects—this will never amount to anything.

Which is why Abraham instituted Plan B—Project Hagar and the newly born Ishmael, whom God rejected as the covenant seed.

This was Abraham’s lack of faith, not act of faith.

Ishmael would grow up resentful, fulfilling the prophecy of God’s words to Hagar that Ishmael’s ***hand would be against everyone – Genesis 16:12.***

Ishmael would become the father of the Arab nation – a constant thorn in the side of Isaac’s descendants, the Jewish people to this very day.

And by the way, as a sidebar here, the battle between Isaac descendants and Ishmael’s descendants isn’t going to let up until the coming Kingdom of Christ on earth—only then will you genuine, lasting peace in the Middle East.

Now back to the program in progress . . . when all prospects for God’s promise to Abraham seemed impossible, just after Abraham blew out the candles on his 100th birthday cake—and Sarah has 90 candles on hers—Sarah announces absolutely shocking news . . . and nine months later they name their newborn son, Isaac.

He grows up—for 30 years Abraham experiences prosperity—all his prayers, in effect, are answered.

You can almost imagine Abraham saying, “My tests of faith are over!” Oh no!

And the same for you my friend — **your greatest test of faith is your next one.**

“Abraham – take your son and sacrifice him on a mountain ridge I’ll show to you.” (Genesis 22:2)

Isaac would become a type of Christ throughout this entire ordeal.

Christ	Isaac
Only son offered by His Father (<i>John 3:16</i>)	Only son offered by His Father (<i>Gen 22:12</i>)
Carried the crossbeam for His sacrifice (<i>John 19:17</i>)	Carried the wood for his own sacrifice (<i>Gen 22:5</i>)
Willingly suffered on the cross (<i>Phil 2:8</i>)	Willingly mounted the altar (<i>Gen 22:9</i>)

As Abraham raised the knife to take his sons' life, an angel stopped him, and Abraham saw a ram nearby with his head caught in the thicket.

It had been there all along . . . that had to have been the quietest ram in world history!

And God promised Abraham that He would provide a lamb for the sacrifice (*Genesis 22:8*) – but wait, this was a ram.

You're way ahead of me!

Abraham would afterward say, "***On the mount of the Lord it will be provided.***" (*Genesis 22:14*)

And on that same ridge of hills, centuries later, the Lamb of God would be offered as a sacrifice for the sins of the world—fulfilling the prophecy of Abraham and the type that Isaac had served.

Jay Herndon was a missionary to a poor mining village in Ireland. He wrote about an incident several years ago that I read. *One cold evening, the company bus, filled with the men of the village after a long day at work, was returning down the mountain from their mine.*

The road was slick with ice on that dark winter evening and the bus driver – an experienced man – had to navigate carefully. The road was extremely narrow – to the left of the bus were the sharp rocks of the mountain side and to the right was a sheer cliff that plunged hundreds of feet below.

Suddenly, just a few yards ahead of the bus, the men could see the figure of a little boy, sitting in the middle of the road playing with one of his toys. The driver had only a split second to make a decision – to swerve or stop would create skidding and perhaps all the lives of these men and fathers would be lost. To continue forward meant the certain death of the boy, who was oblivious to the oncoming bus.

Jay Herndon wrote that after the bus stopped a few hundred feet beyond the crumpled form of the boy, the driver of the bus was the first one off. He ran back and picked up the lifeless form of his own son – and he buried his head in the boy's coat and wept.

We have the idea that Abraham whistled merrily as he walked up Moriah's hill . . . that he'd read the rest of the chapter. We have the idea that this really wasn't a test at all because he's the friend of God and everything will turn out perfectly.

We so easily overlook the pain of 50 years of waiting—and the thought of taking his own son's life.

That's so much like us isn't it? **We minimize the tests of others and magnify the challenges in our own lives.**

And here's where we miss James' point. James isn't bringing up Abraham so he can rehearse Old Testament history to prove he stayed awake in Synagogue school.

He's using Abraham's decision of faith as an example for us! He's effectively saying, "**The example of Abraham which accepted the tests of God—imperfectly at times, but completely at other times—is to be our example of living, dynamic faith.**"

This is more than Old Testament history. For Abraham, this was the culmination of 50 years of testing that provided the world an opportunity to see the proof of mature faith—lived out in the court of public opinion.

This is the vindication of dynamic faith.

Let your light so shine before men – not in your garage – before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

What is it about our lives that would cause an unbeliever to say, "Wow, their faith is the genuine item!"

We would *like* to believe that we are demonstrating faith in God by what we have.

This is James' point : **we demonstrate dynamic faith by**

- **what we surrender**
- **by what we give away**
- **by how you serve the needs of another**
- **by how we practice what we preach and profess**
- **by how our lives revolve around submission under difficult circumstances and trust in God during impossible times.**

So . . . what has God asked *you* to surrender?

What has He asked you to place on the altar of your life? What hard thing has He asked of you?

Dead faith would say, “The altar of surrender to Christ is something every Christian ought to do” and then do nothing.

Demonic faith would say, “The altar of surrender to Christ exists and it is real and there are many who live for Him” but they will never surrender.

Dynamic faith will say, “The altar of surrender to Christ is real and every believer who desires to mature in their faith will submit to the tests and to the challenges – imperfectly at times, but completely at other times – *and I am willing to surrender.*”

I will vindicate out there in the court of public opinion my testimony — I really do belong to God and God belongs to me.

Faith alone justifies, John Calvin would write, but the faith that justifies is never alone.

James is saying . . . take your faith outside.

**Dynamic faith is the demonstration
of faith with life!**

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- i Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 136
 - ii Charles R. Swindoll, James: Practical and Authentic Living (Insight for Living, 1991), p. 87
 - iii Warren W. Wiersbe, James: Be Mature (Victor Books, 1979), p. 78
 - iv Mary Baker Eddy, Science and Health, p. 291
 - v John MacArthur, James (Moody Press, 1998), p. 136
 - vi D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 171
 - vii Daniel M. Doriani, James (R&R Publishing, 2007), p. 95
 - viii Frank E. Gaebelien, The Practical Epistle of James (The Haddon Craftsman, Inc. 1955), p. 70
 - ix R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith That Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 117
 - x John Phillips, Exploring the Epistle of James (Kregel, 2004), p. 88
 - xi Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, James: Practical and Authentic Living (Insight for Living, 1991), p. 93
 - xii Hughes, p. 92
 - xiii Ibid