What Role Do Works Have In Salvation?
Scripture: James 2
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Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 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. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. (2:21–24)

As noted in the Introduction, the first phrase of verse 21 was a severe stumbling block to Martin Luther. He was so adamantly opposed to the Roman Catholic dogma of salvation through works, and so strong a defender of the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, that he completely missed James's point here, calling the entire writing "an epistle of straw." But, as explained in the previous commentary chapter, James was not contradicting the doctrine of salvation by faith. He was not dealing with the means of salvation at all, but rather with its outcome, the evidence that it had genuinely occurred. After establishing that the absence of good works proves that a professed faith is not real and saving but rather is deceptive and dead, he then emphasized the corollary truth that genuine salvation, which is always and only by God's grace working through man's faith, inevitably will be demonstrated outwardly in the form of righteous deeds.

Although James's primary audience was Jewish (see 1:1), 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 several places. 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.

Because fallen man is morally and spiritually bankrupt, with no redeeming merit at all before God, nothing he can possibly do in himself and by his own power can make him right and acceptable before the Lord. It is for that reason that salvation has always been possible solely through the pure graciousness of God working through a faithful response to His grace. It is not that in the Old Testament men were saved through the law and that in the New they are saved by faith. At whatever point in the unfolding revelation and work of God men may have lived or will ever live, God requires nothing of them for salvation except true faith in Him. Hebrews 11 makes abundantly clear that both

before and after the law was given at Sinai, salvation was by faith. Abraham “believed in the Lord,” Moses tells us; “and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

Yet James says that the **father** of the faithful, whose very faith itself was a gift of God (Eph. 2:8), was nevertheless **justified by works.** That seeming contradiction, which has frustrated and confused believers throughout the history of the church, is clarified by understanding that justification by faith pertains 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.

Some have further imagined a contradiction between James’s declaration that Abraham was **justified by works** and Paul’s unequivocal teaching that he was justified solely by grace through faith (Rom. 4:1–25; Gal. 3:6–9). Such is not the case, however. James has already emphasized that salvation is God’s gracious gift (1:17–18), and in verse 23 he quotes Genesis 15:6, which declares that God imputed righteousness to Abraham solely on the basis of his faith. Also, the specific event James said justified Abraham by works was the offering of Isaac (v. 21; cf. Gen. 22:9–12)—an event that occurred many years after he was declared righteous by God (Gen. 12:1–7; 15:6). James is teaching, then, that Abraham’s willingness to offer Isaac vindicates his faith before men—a teaching with which the apostle Paul was in wholehearted agreement (Eph. 2:10). There is thus no conflict between the two inspired writers.

It is important to understand that the Greek verb *dikaioo* (**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 “justified as a gift by [God’s] grace through the redemption which 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).

The second meaning of *dikaioo* 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 found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, ‘That You may be justified in Your words, and prevail when You are judged’ ” (Rom. 3:4). He writes to Timothy that Jesus Christ

“was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated [from *dikaioo*] in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16). Jesus commented that “wisdom is vindicated [justified] by all her children” (Luke 7:35).

It is the second sense in which James uses *dikaioo* in 2:21, asking rhetorically, **Was not Abraham our father justified by works?** He explains that Abraham’s supreme demonstration of that justification occurred **when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar,** which, as noted above, happened many years after his justification by faith recorded in Genesis 15:6. It was when he **offered up Isaac** that the whole world could perceive the reality of his faith, that it was genuine rather than spurious, obedient rather than deceptive, living rather than dead. Although God’s command for Abraham to sacrifice **Isaac his son** threatened to abrogate His promise of blessing the world specifically through **Isaac** and also contradicted what Abraham knew to be God’s prohibition of human sacrifice (a form of murder), the patriarch trusted God implicitly. Without question or wavering, “Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (Gen. 22:3). We do not know all that went through Abraham’s mind at the time, but he told the young men who accompanied them, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and *we will worship and return to you*” (v. 5, emphasis added). 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 unalterably in the righteous character of God, that He would never violate either His divine covenant or His holy standards.

Abraham was not a perfect man, either in his faith or in his works. After many years had passed without Sarah’s having the promised heir, he took matters into his own hands, having a son, Ishmael, by Hagar, his wife’s maid. His wavering trust in the Lord led him to commit adultery. That, in turn, led to the creation of the Arab peoples—who, since that time, have been a continuing thorn in the side of the Jews, God’s chosen people through Isaac. In those and other instances, such as his twice lying about Sarah’s being his sister (Gen. 12:19; 20:2), his works obviously *did not justify* him before men.

But James’s point is that, in the overall pattern of his life, Abraham faithfully vindicated his saving faith through his many good works, above all else by offering Isaac. When a man is justified before God, he will always prove that justification before other men. A man who has been declared and made righteous will live righteously. Imputed righteousness will manifest practical righteousness. In the words of John Calvin, “Faith alone justifies; but the faith that justifies is never alone.” And in the words of an unknown poet, “Let all who hold this faith and hope in holy deeds abound; thus faith approves itself sincere by active virtue crowned.”

You see that faith was working with his works, James continues to explain, **and** as a **result of the works, faith was perfected.** It is not that salvation requires **faith** *plus* **works**, but that works are the consequent outgrowth and completion of genuine **faith**. As Jesus pointed out on several occasions, the purpose of a plant is to grow and to bear fruit—*fruit* representing its natural produce, whether figs, olives, nuts, flowers, or whatever. Consequently, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:19–20). Bearing fruit is not a function added to a plant but is an integral part of its design and purpose. Even before it is planted, a seed contains the genetic structure for producing its own kind of fruit. When a person is born again through saving **faith** and is given a new nature by God, he is given the genetic structure, as it were, for producing moral and spiritual good **works**. That is the sense in which **faith** is **perfected**. It produces the godly fruit for which it was designed (Eph. 2:10). Just as a fruit tree has not fulfilled its goal until it bears fruit, so also faith has not reached its end until it demonstrates itself in a righteous life.

That is the sense in which Abraham was justified by works. His unreserved willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the only son of promise, was the works by which his justification by faith was demonstrated and made manifest before men. Quoting the Genesis 15:6 passage cited earlier, James says that the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Fulfilled does not refer to a fulfillment of prophecy but rather to fulfillment of the principle that justification by faith results in justification by works. James here cites the same text Paul uses in his potent defense of justification by faith:

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. (Rom. 4:2–5)

Abraham had no written divine revelation to read and knew very little about the Lord. But he responded positively to all that he was told by God, and it was then that his faith **was reckoned to him as righteousness.**

But how, we wonder, could God have justified and saved Abraham —who lived some two thousand

years before Christ—when apart from Jesus Christ no one can be saved (Matt. 10:32; John 8:56; Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; etc.). It is because “to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom. 14:9). Jesus said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). Despite his limited theological knowledge, Abraham’s trust in the Lord was sufficient, and tantamount to belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, the coming Messiah and Savior of the world. Like all true believers who lived before Christ, who “died in faith, without receiving the promises,” Abraham nevertheless was enabled by God to understand that a Savior would come to fulfill all God’s promises and he “welcomed them from a distance” (Heb. 11:13).

Due to his belief and his resulting obedience, Abraham **was called the friend of God.** What dignity, honor, and joy! Because his faith was genuine and was therefore manifested and proven, he entered the wonderful fellowship of those whom God calls his friends. The writer of 2 Chronicles exults, “Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever?” (2 Chron. 20:7). Through Isaiah the Lord Himself spoke of “Abraham My friend” (Isa. 41:8). The basis of that divine friendship was Abraham’s obedience, his justification by works. Just as he was the father of the faithful (Rom. 4:11; Gal. 3:7), he might also be called the father of the obedient, because those two godly characteristics are inseparable. “You are My friends,” Jesus said, “if you do what I command you” (John 15:14).

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