

James 2:20-26  
August 11, 2024



### CONVERSATION STARTERS

What are some highs or lows you experienced this past week?

What Scripture has been shaping you recently?

Where have you seen God moving in your life this week?

What did you hear in today's sermon OR read in today's passage that you would like to discuss?

What did you learn about yourself in today's sermon/passage?

What did you learn about God in today's sermon/passage?

What convicted you as you listened to today's sermon OR read in today's passage?

### MAIN POINT

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac in obedience showed his righteousness before God and reveals to us that faith works.

### INTRODUCTION

*As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.*

**How would you describe the difference between something "genuine" and a "counterfeit"?**

**Have you ever seen counterfeit money? If so, in what context?**

**How do you feel when you find out something you thought was real is counterfeit?**

No one likes to be deceived into believing something is real that turns out to be fake or counterfeit. This is especially an issue when it comes to money. There are law



enforcement professionals dedicated to the task of identifying counterfeit money. Many might think that to spot fake money a person should study all the techniques criminals use to create the counterfeit currency. The truth is that to become an expert in identifying counterfeit money trainees must spend hundreds of hours studying authentic currency. The goal is to know the real thing so well that even the most well-done fakes stand out immediately. It takes a trained pair of eyes to spot a counterfeit. As Christians, we sometimes encounter counterfeit faith. In today's passage, James explains how to identify genuine faith, whether in yourself or someone else.

## **UNDERSTANDING**

*Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.*

**Glance back over verses 14-19, which we studied last week, and summarize that part of James's letter.**

 ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ROMANS 3:28.

In Romans 3:28, Paul was talking to an imaginary opponent who was struggling with the idea that humans contribute nothing to their own salvation. Faith as the way of salvation is the antithesis of salvation by works. We receive salvation as a gift through faith. It might seem like James and Paul had a different understanding of the gospel, but that is not true at all. They were explaining the gospel to two different audiences who were struggling with two different misapplications of God's Word. In James 2, James was fighting against "easy believism." In Romans 3:28, Paul was fighting against legalism.

**How might people try to make faith another work they accomplish? How can we fight this tendency in ourselves?**

**How might Christians, saved by grace, begin to view works as payment for wrongdoing?**

**Which do you fight most often: the idea that faith is another work to accomplish or that our works are a payment for our sin? Explain.**

 ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JAMES 2:20-26.

**Does James use works in a negative sense or a positive sense here? How can works be both negative (Romans 3) and positive (James 2)?**

James used Abraham and Rahab as case studies to seal his point. He posed the question of how useful faith without works could possibly be (2:20). Using the example of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22), James highlighted how Abraham demonstrated the faith he claimed.



**Why do you think James used the example of Abraham to communicate his message? How does the scene with Isaac illustrate James’s point?**

The scene in which God called Abraham to sacrifice His son Isaac was in the context of God testing Abraham (Genesis 22:1). Abraham’s faith had already been “credited to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6) but was being tested in Genesis 22 for genuineness. God tested Abraham to see if obedience would flow from his faith or if Abraham only held a theoretical kind of faith. James said that “by works, [Abraham’s] faith was made complete” (2:22) and that his works justified him (2:24). James likely had in mind that these actions were the evidence of such faith.

**How did Rahab’s example add to James’s message?**

Rahab received into her home Israelites whom Joshua sent to spy out the city of Jericho. She hid them in her home and protected them from their pursuers. She deliberately misled the pursuers by sending them off in a different direction while she continued to hide the spies. Later, she guided the spies in making their escape (Joshua 2). If residents—especially the rulers—of Jericho had known of her acts of disloyalty, they likely would have put her to death. Joshua 2:8-13 makes it clear that Rahab’s faith in Israel’s God caused her to protect his representatives.

In his historical Jewish context, it is remarkable that James would give a female example as one whose actions his readers were to imitate. As with Abraham, he gave focus to Rahab’s actions that showed her active faith in God. James’s final statement in this passage served to re-emphasize his point: just as the body cannot live without the spirit, so faith is not truly alive without resulting works.

**Is it strange to you that James moved from referring to his audience as “brothers and sisters” (vv.5, 14) to “Senseless person” in verse 20? Why do you think he did this?**

**Does verse 21 mean Abraham was not righteous before he offered his son Isaac on the altar? What does it mean?**

For examples of authentic faith, James turned to the Old Testament. First, he pointed to Abraham, the father of the Hebrews—the first patriarch. The example of Abraham and his offer of Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-19) affirms James’s teachings about faith. Abraham’s faith was proven genuine by his obedience to God’s command. His faith made his good works possible. Faith’s purpose in a believer’s life is to produce good works; without good works, faith is incomplete. Good works demonstrate faith’s integrity and maturity.

**Considering Romans 3 and James 2, how can you and I be declared right before God? Faith or works?**

**What is the object of authentic faith?**



## **APPLICATION**

*Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.*

**How would you describe your faith? Is it living and active, as reflected by how you live and serve? Or might it be described as stagnant or dead? What needs to change?**

**How would you answer someone who argues that James and Paul expressed two different views of what it means to be saved?**

**How would the world be different if every Christian demonstrated authentic faith as James described it?**

## **PRAYER**

*Close your time together by sharing prayer requests, praying for each other, and the group.*

Thank God that salvation is by faith. Invite Him to show you how faith needs to work in your life as you trust Him wholeheartedly and follow Him sacrificially.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

*Encourage your group to look ahead to next week's scripture passage as we continue our study, **Faith and Works: A Study of James.***

**August 18, 2024 --- James 3:1-12**



## COMMENTARY

### James 2:20-26

**2:20.** Verse 20 calls on the objector to recognize that the conclusions of verses 18–19 are correct while also introducing verses 21–26. James appeals to us to become learners. We can rephrase the question as: “Are you willing to be taught that a barren faith is worthless?”

Foolish also appears in Mark 12:3, translated “empty-handed.” The objector was spiritually foolish or willfully ignorant. The last word of the verse is different in important Greek manuscripts. King James follows the reading of many manuscripts in translating: “dead.” Most modern versions follow Greek manuscripts with a word which means useless or “barren.” The same Greek word in 2 Peter 1:8 is translated “ineffective.”

Have you ever dealt with professing Christians who felt they could keep their faith to themselves and did not need to demonstrate their faith? We must lead these people to see that true faith shows itself in visible deeds, not merely by agreeing with a creed.

**2.:21–26.** James selected Abraham and Rahab as examples of people who showed genuine faith by their deeds. Their examples stand in complete contrast. Abraham was the ancestor of both Jews and Gentiles. He provided a sterling example of faith (Heb. 11:8–12). Rahab was a Gentile and a prostitute (Josh. 2:1–24), but Matthew listed her in the genealogy of Christ (Matt. 1:5). Although they came from different backgrounds, both showed the reality of their faith.

**2:21–23.** Verse 21 picks up the Old Testament incident in which Abraham showed his willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1–18). Verse 23 refers to the incident in which “Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6), which took place at least thirty years before that of Genesis 22.

Verse 21 concludes that Abraham showed his righteousness by his willingness to offer Isaac on the altar. KJV translates “justified” instead of NIV’s considered righteous. Paul uses the same Greek word in Romans 3:28; 4:2, 5; and 5:1 (“justified”) to describe the righteousness God credits to a believer through faith in Jesus Christ. James uses the word to describe the righteousness we show to others as we obey Jesus. The saving faith of Abraham showed itself by his total obedience to God in the matter of offering up Isaac. The faith James commended moves the heart and controls the life. Again, James was demanding that true faith must be alive and vital.

Verse 22 states two facts about Abraham’s faith. First, his faith and his actions were working together. Abraham’s faith prompted his obedience. It prodded him on to do good works. Second, his faith was made complete by what he did. His obedience demonstrated the integrity of his faith. This is not to say that previously Abraham had a weak faith. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac vividly demonstrated the existence of true faith.



Verse 23 summarizes the entire process. Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac fulfilled the promise of Genesis 15:6. Abraham's obedience showed he was a righteous man. God declared Abraham righteous as a matter of grace. Abraham showed the reality of this righteousness by his actions in Genesis 22. As a result of this obedience, God drew Abraham into a closer fellowship with him and called him God's friend. Note that Abraham did not merely determine that God would be his friend. God initiated the action. God reached out to him and gave him the privilege of intimacy and closeness.

**2:24-26.** Verse 24 presents the conclusions about Abraham. Abraham had shown the reality of his faith by his willingness to offer Isaac in obedience to God's command. We are made right in God's sight through a faith which produces works. This does not claim that God justifies his people by our deeds. The Bible insists that saving faith must show itself by visible commitment to the Lord and compassion for others. Faith alone will bring salvation to anyone, but saving faith does not come alone. It is accompanied by works which show the genuineness of faith. James's declaration that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone may seem to contradict Rm 3:28, but note that Paul was writing about "works of the law," meaning the Mosaic law, whereas James spoke only of "works," which has in view good deeds. James's references to law are to "the law of freedom" (the gospel; see 2:12) and to "the royal law" (v. 8; Lv 19:18), both of which affirm his assertion that true faith is expressed through good works

