

Faith and Works in the Bible

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[0 : 0 0] Ed. Many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots. When I was a 16 year old doing my O levels as they were called back then, my parents used to think I was mad as I would walk around the house repeating that phrase to myself. Many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots. Perhaps they saw it as an early sign of madness as my father would rush out into his garden to check that the rhubarb was not being eaten by hungry rabbits in the garden. You see many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots is an acronym with the first letter of each word representing another word but making these other words easier to remember. So this phrase many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots helped me to remember the seven characteristics of a living organism. I was after all studying

O level biology. These are movement, nutrition, respiration, excretion, growth, response, and reproduction. Every living thing from the simplest virus to the most complex human being displays all of these seven characteristics. And so if you should ask the question, what does it look like to be alive? It means to breathe. It means to grow. It means to respond and so on. Things which don't do these seven things aren't alive. Things like stones or plastics. Many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots. I don't remember much from school but I do remember that.

Now let's ask another question. What does it look like to have a living faith in Jesus Christ? What does it look like to have a living faith in Jesus Christ?

For some who lived in the days of the early church, this was a meaningless question because by definition, of course, faith can't be seen. But for the church which followed Jesus, it was a very important question because just as for every living creature giving evidence of its own life, so the Christian must give evidence of his faith. If something doesn't exhibit nutrition, if it doesn't eat, if it doesn't respire, if it doesn't excrete, if it doesn't grow, if it doesn't respond, if it has no capacity for reproduction, then by definition it is not alive. If a person claims to be a Christian but does not exhibit good deeds or good works, he or she does not possess a living faith in Jesus Christ. They're spiritually dead and they're therefore not a Christian at all. In many ways, the argument James is proposing is very simple indeed. A simple faith in Jesus Christ lives. A saving faith lives and that life is expressed in good work.

Last week, as we studied our way through James 2, 14 through 19, we saw from images taken from the real-life early church that a saving faith gives and a living faith grows. This week from James 2, 20 through 26, James digs into the history of the Jewish nation and picks out two of its most prominent characters, Abraham the patriarch and Rahab the prostitute. This is a very strange couple, to say the least, for James to use, is it not?

[4 : 1 9] Abraham is used often by Paul to point to the supremacy of justification by faith alone. Rahab was an embarrassment, shall we say, to many Jewish men, and at least in her chosen vocation, is most certainly not to be imitated. And yet, according to James, both of them expressed their faith in their works. James uses these two heroes of the faith to support his argument that a saving faith gives and a living faith grows. And in doing so, James wants to point out three things to us in these final verses of chapter two. Faith is expressed in works. Faith is perfected in works.

And faith lives through works. Faith is perfected in works.

For fair or for foul.

First of all, James wants to argue that faith is expressed in works. Faith is expressed in works. Of all the characters in the Old Testament, Abraham is in most ways the most attractive. In the Jewish mind, Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel. The vast majority of Abraham's life is characterized by an unswerving faith in God and his promises.

[6 : 5 0] And indeed, in another place, Abraham is called the father of the faithful. The question James wants to explore with us is found in verse 20.

What was it that made Abraham's faith so productive? What was it that made Abraham's faith so productive? What was it that made Abraham's faith so productive? What was it that made Abraham's faith so productive? That is, you see, a most important question for us. What is it that made Abraham's faith so productive and useful?

What is it that transforms it from being merely intellectual to being alive and true? There are perhaps some of us who don't think they have any real faith in Christ at all.

Or if they do, they don't have faith which is saving and living. They may well be intellectually convinced of the truth of Christianity, but it's a cold intellectualism.

[7 : 56] It is not a warm-hearted embrace of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And by a challenge to you, I want to suggest to you that if your faith does not express itself in good works, then it is perhaps not a genuine faith at all.

I need to go back to basics and examine what it means to have a true faith in Jesus. Well, back to Abraham, the father of the faithful, by whose faith he was counted righteous and justified by God. And in verse 21, James asks an important question. Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac up upon the altar?

You remember the story of how Abraham offered up his son of the top of Mount Moriah, but at the last moment, God saved him from the ultimate pain, and a ram was provided in the place of his son. But the operative phrase is this, was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did?

[9 : 15] In other words, it was not just what he believed, it was also what he did. Does this not mean that Abraham was justified not by faith alone, but also by works?

Does this not contradict Paul's plain teaching that a man is justified by faith and not by works? Well, not at all, because as a righteous Jew, James would have been very familiar with the words of Genesis 15, verse 6.

Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Without a doubt, James believed in the primacy of faith, faith was justified by faith, but he wants to insist that that faith which justifies must express itself in good works.

And so the faith of Abraham is expressed in his willingness to offer up Isaac on the altar in obedience to the command of God. We must never doubt that for James, as for Paul, faith came first.

But that a saving, living, growing faith in Jesus Christ is always and inevitably expressed in good works, in obedience.

[10 : 38] For Abraham, it was expressed in his obedience to the command of God and his response to the promises of God. For the Christians of James' day, it was to be expressed in refusing to show favoritism in the church to the rich among them, and showing mercy and grace to the poor among them.

You see, the same principle which operates in Genesis operates also in James. The consistency of faith. Just like a living organism breathes, it perspires, so a Christian engages in good works.

Just like a living organism has the capacity to reproduce, so a Christian shows mercy to the poor. He is quick to listen. He is slow to speak.

He's slow to become angry. So let's get back to Abraham once more. Why did he obey God in the matter of Isaac?

Was it to earn the promises of God? Or was it because God had already made promises to him? To bring the question into our age and culture.

[11 : 57] Did he offer Isaac on the altar in order to earn salvation? Or because he wanted to express his faith? These are the important questions.

Now, one quick aside. When we are reading the various authors of the New Testament, we must be very careful in our own personal study to remember that each one of them has their own personalities.

And they each use words in their own ways. And so the word justify and count righteous may well be used in slightly different ways by James and by Paul.

And yet both are right. I guess the question comes down to this. How do we know that Abraham really believed God's promises?

How do we know? It was because he expressed his faith in action. It was what he did that gave authenticity and reality to his faith.

[13:10] And his example holds good for us today. An example which never goes out of fashion, but challenges us all. By no means was Abraham a perfect man.

And in the double episode of him trying to pawn off his wife as his sister, he shows himself to just be a man at best. And yet over all this, his faith in God expresses itself in good works, in acts of faithfulness to God and to others.

So then let me ask you a question. In what ways are you expressing your faith in Christ? Let me remind you that living organisms, they breathe, they respond, they move, and so on.

And a living, saving faith must express itself in good works. So what are the good works in which you are engaged as an inevitable expression of your faith?

Are you gaining mastery over your tongues and over your temper? Are you engaged in caring for those among us who are vulnerable?

[14:24] Are you refusing to ignore or belittle them? Are you keeping yourself unpolluted from the world? None of us are ever going to be commanded to offer our children upon altars to God as an expression of our faith in Jesus.

Such a command is horrendous. But we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus does not call on us to go to war with surrounding nations.

He calls upon us to love surrounding nations. He does not command us to die upon a cross to save a world from their sins.

Such an action is unrepeatable. But he does command us to give of ourselves and our resources until it hurts. And so the question is this, a question I really want us to wrestle with this week.

In what ways am I as an individual Christian? In what ways am I as an individual Christian expressing my faith in Jesus?

[15:33] In what ways could James have said of me, he has been justified for what he did? Don't ask the question of the church.

What's the church doing to express its faith in good works? Don't ask it of anyone else. Ask it of yourself. James' second argument is that faith is not just expressed in works, but it's perfected by works.

It's perfected by works. Let me remind you that comparing James and Paul is a fruitless and pointless exercise. These men were from different backgrounds.

They're speaking to different audiences, and they're using words in slightly different ways. Rather than tracing Paul back to James or James back to Paul, we should trace them both back to Jesus. James continues to speak about Abraham. There we have it.

[16:46] Faith and actions, they are working together. They are cooperating, as it were. That is a major theme in James' description of a wise Christian's life.

He does not do and not believe. And he does not believe and not do. He does both, because both are inevitably linked together in the Christian life.

Remember that faith always comes first, but it's always accompanied, helped, and supported by actions.

And furthermore, according to James, faith is completed in actions. There will be no one in heaven who has not engaged in good works of one kind or another as an expression of their faith in Jesus and his gospel.

For even the dying thief on the cross, born again in the last couple of hours of his life, spoke to the other man on the cross, defending Jesus and condemning himself.

[18:02] And James says, you know, faith and works cooperate in the Christian life, and works bring our faith to completion. This is a very hard teaching for us to understand, and even harder to swallow.

We must be very, very careful how we express and understand this. We understand, of course, faith comes first. Without faith, there can be no works at all.

And yet James tells us here in black and white, that our faith must be accompanied by good works, for it is through our good works, the aim of our faith in Jesus is achieved.

That of a Christ life like love and life, where we love our neighbours as Jesus did. A life where faith and works cannot be divided from one another, but they naturally flow into and out from each other.

And I guess the question that we're asking is this, why did God give us that faith in the first place? Why did we believe?

[19 : 24] Let's ask Paul, the supposed enemy of James. In Ephesians 2, he insists, it is by grace through faith, and not by our obedience to the works of the law, we have been saved.

And yet in verse 10, he tells us what the objective of that faith is. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

And so, for Paul, the reason God gave us faith in Christ is to do good works. What about Peter, the apostle Peter, where in 1 Peter 2, 24, Peter insists upon our salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross, and how it is that by the wounds of Jesus, we have been healed.

And yet Peter walks the same path as Paul when he insists, he that's Jesus, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed. In other words, the goal of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf is that we might die to sin and live for righteousness.

[20 : 51] Works complete faith. We could go on, we could explore the thinking of John, and Jude, the writer to the Hebrews also, we'd find exactly the same teaching, that good works are the perfecting of a genuine faith in Jesus.

We frustrate the aim and purpose of faith if we do not express it in good works. And in fact, the absence of good works for Jesus may well be evidence of the absence of a genuine faith in Jesus. So what then does this mean in practice for us as Christians? Well, let's readjust our views of what true holiness are for a second.

The holiest Christians among us aren't necessarily those who know most about Jesus, but who put into practice what they do know about Jesus, even if that isn't very much at all.

Genuine faith and holiness aren't expressed in a monastery with its endless chanting and its ceremonies, but in the day-to-day grime of modern living with the challenges of loving the unlovable, of controlling our anger when asked to do unreasonable things in the workplace, of caring for the vulnerable among us, of listening more than speaking, of keeping a tight rein on our tongues, and of treating everyone in the church equally, without any kind of discrimination at all.

[22 : 38] Yes, be very careful of reading James through Pauline eyes or reading Paul through Jacobean eyes. Read them both in the light of Jesus, remembering always what Jesus said.

By their fruits, you shall know them. You'll quickly realize that faith and works must inevitably work together in a Christian's life, or that there is no Christian life at all.

Finally this evening, James argues, faith doesn't just express itself in works, doesn't just complete itself in works. Faith lives through works.

It lives through works. You'll know that the overriding theme of this chapter has been favoritism. The contrast has been made between how the rich and the poor are treated in the church.

James is very clever in his use of Abraham as an example of faith at work, because Abraham would probably have been counted as one who, because of his great wealth and status and position, would have been welcomed with open arms into the early church.

[23 : 52] But the other person James chooses, Rahab, because she had been a prostitute, would not have been. She would have been like that poor man, roughly handled, told to sit on the floor, treated as a second-class citizen.

And yet James says, she is no less an example of a living faith expressing itself through actions, of faith living through works. You can read her story in Joshua chapter 2.

An inhabitant of Jericho, Rahab showed hospitality to the Israelite spies. She hid them from their enemies, and she facilitated their escape.

Rahab is really a very fascinating character, and James says of her that she was considered righteous for what she did. Just like Abraham was considered righteous for what he did with Isaac, so Rahab was considered righteous for what she did for the Israelite spies.

They are both considered righteous on account of their actions. Again, let me be clear here. We must be very careful not to read James through Paul's eyes or vice versa, but to be content with their individual arguments, especially with respect to the words considered righteous.

[25 : 22] They are not saying different things, but they are speaking to different audiences. They are emphasizing different points, and so you perhaps would expect James and Paul to sound slightly different from one another.

James is not saying that Rahab was justified by her works. For if you look back into that passage in Joshua chapter 2, you realize that what motivated Rahab's actions toward these Israelite spies was that she had come to believe in the Lord God of Israel for herself.

So James is saying exactly the same of Rahab as what he said of Abraham. That her faith in the Lord God of Israel was expressed in her works for the Israelite spies.

That her works completed her faith, and that her faith lived through her works. You know, I hope you can see this because it really is very important for us if we are to catch the drift, as it were, of James' thought.

True wisdom does not just consist in believing the right things. It consists in living the right way. Or can we be even more precise than that?

[26 : 39] True wisdom consists in living the right way because we believe the right things. True wisdom, according to James, consists in living the right way because we believe the right things.

Both Abraham and Rahab put their trust in the Lord God, and for that reason they obeyed and acted righteously. Therein lies wisdom for us.

But because we believe the right things about God, we're going to be careful not to show favoritism in the church. We're going to be careful to keep a tight rein in our tongues.

We're going to be careful to control our tempers and so on. What comes first is faith in Christ, believing the right things about Him.

But without works, living the right way, that faith is dead. And so in verse 26, James is reminding us that effectively many naughty rabbits eat green rhubarb roots.

[27 : 52] Dead things don't grow, they don't move. A dead faith in Christ does not express itself in good works for Christ, but a living faith will.

A living faith will express itself in good works, a living faith will complete itself in good works, and a living faith will live through our works.

One last thought in closing. Abraham and Rahab have their faith in common, but they both have something else in common. They are both physical ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Abraham the patriarch, Rahab the prostitute. Both are mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1. As Christians, we are saved by the cross on which Abraham and Rahab's greater grandson Jesus died to take their sins and our sins away.

We depend upon Christ's grace for forgiveness and obedience. And so let me conclude this evening by reiterating James' point from this chapter taken from verse 1.

[29 : 16] Are you a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? And then also from verse 26, the beginning and the end, is your faith in Jesus Christ accompanied by works for Jesus Christ?

Amen. Next week, we're going to take a break from James and we're going to move on to a different subject for our summer Sunday evenings.

We're going to sing now the remainder of the verses in Psalm 28. Remember, David, difficult situation. from verses 6 through 9, David changes tune as it were and he's looking back with hindsight upon how God delivered him.

Verse 5, he's still in the trouble but we're going to sing from verse 5 to verse 9. The tune is Hannah. Because the Lord's works, they despise and treat his actions with disdain. In justice, he will tear them down and never build them up again.

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praise to the Lord for he has heard look before mercy which I lay He is my strength He is my shield I trust in him who sends me aid my heart who lifted these words and droid my hands to him I gladly sing the Lord who lives in evil strength a streaming fortress for his King Lord, sing your people your own thought be pleased for every day to bless be careful shepherd at the end forever in your faithfulness we would normally be taking up our offering at this point and