

## **How we are saved: What is the Role of Faith and Works in our Salvation?**

Much of what we've seen in the book of Revelation deals with the ultimate preservation and rescue of **the saved** from the judgment that God is rightly storing up for those who never repent. Which raises a very good question. How did the "saved" gain their salvation? **How exactly is one saved?** That is what we're going to look at today, and to answer that question fully, we have to make peace between these two guys (Paul and James).

When it comes to understanding the scriptures, we can get some things wrong, and it doesn't matter. Case in point, is there going to be a rapture? Some Christians think yes, some Christians think no. Somebody's wrong. But does it matter? Nope. If God wants to rapture us, he will, whether we think he's going to do it or not. And He doesn't want to rapture us, then there won't be a rapture.

But there are some things we dare not get wrong. I would put "Exactly how is one saved?" at the top of that list. Because the answer to THAT matters, doesn't it? It will determine our eternal condition. The right answer leads to heaven, everlasting joy in the presence of God. The wrong answer leads to Hell, everlasting punishment separated from God.

The question on our table today is this: **Are we saved by faith alone? Or are we saved by faith plus the works we do?** Paul says we are justified by faith alone apart from works. James says we are justified by faith plus our works.

How do we deal with this apparent contradiction? One thing we can't do is say "Well they just disagree. And since they both can't be right, one of them must be wrong." In their daily life, Paul and James could certainly disagree about a lot of things, couldn't they. But when it comes to them writing scripture, something very special is going on, because they're not just sitting down and expressing a point of view or an opinion. II Peter tells us biblical authors were not offering their own interpretation but instead, being moved by the Holy Spirit, they were speaking for God. That's why we call the Bible the Word of God. And God does not speak with a

forked tongue, saying one thing here and then contradicting himself over there. God cannot lie, the Bible is the word of God, therefore it cannot lie.

What I want to show you today is that Paul and James actually do not disagree, there is no conflict, no contradiction. But **together** they give us our big idea: **It is faith alone that saves, but the faith that saves is never alone.**

First, let's see what Paul says in Galatians. *"Yet we know that a person is **not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ**, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be **justified by faith** in Christ and not by works of the law, because **by works of the law no one will be justified.**"*  
Galatians 2:16

That seems pretty clear, doesn't it. Justified means to be made right with God by God declaring us righteous. **When** does God justify us? The moment we put our faith in Christ. When we do that, God takes the righteousness of Christ and credits it to us... He puts it into our account.

When discussing this concept of justification in his letter to the Romans, Paul offers Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, as proof of what he is saying. *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 counted to him as righteousness.**"* Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (Romans 4:2-5)

You see what he's saying? You work for your employer, and when you get paid, you EARNED that paycheck. It's not a gift, is it? But the Bible says salvation is a gift. Abraham didn't receive his righteousness as payment for his good works; he received it simply by believing.

The underlined O.T. quote here is from Genesis 15 where God made a covenant with Abraham. God had promised to make Abraham into a great nation. Abraham is very

old, so is his wife, so Abraham said, “I don’t have any kids, my heir is my loyal servant Eliezer so I guess you’ll have to work through him.” And God says, “Your servant will not be your heir, but a son that will come forth from your own body will be your heir.” Then God took him outside and said “Look at the heavens and count all the stars if you’re able to. That’s how many descendants you will have.” And that is where the Bible then says ***Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.***

At this point, Abraham hasn’t done anything except place his faith and trust in God. In New Testament lingo we would say this is when Abraham got saved. And he was saved (made right with God) simply by believing what God said was true.

Paul repeats this “faith apart from works” theme in other places, for example:

Eph 2:8-9, For by grace you have been **saved through faith**. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast.

Titus 3:5, he saved us, not **because of works done by us in righteousness**, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 10:9 If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and **believe in your heart** that God raised him from the dead, **you will be saved.**

To repeat what Brandon pointed out last week, the New Testament word translated “believe” is a much stronger word than just mental assent or agreement. It means to actively trust, to exercise faith. In fact, the Greek word for believe is the verb form of the Greek noun for faith. It’s not enough to agree with the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. Even the demons agree with that fact, but they don’t follow Him. To **believe in Jesus** in the John 3:16 way to have everlasting life, you do not just agree with the fact that He is the Son of God, but you enter into a life-long commitment to actively follow Him. That’s why Brandon does well when he reminds us that salvation is more than a one-time prayer or agreeing with ideas like Jesus is the Son of God.

I don't think Paul could make it any clearer that we are saved by faith alone and apart from works. And you and I are thrilled to hear that we don't have to earn our salvation. Everything is hunky dory.

But then along comes James, and he tosses this grenade into the room: *“Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father **justified by works** when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled [the Scripture passage came true] that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. You see that **a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.**”* James 2:20-24

Stop the presses, hold the phone! That is the complete opposite of what Paul says! Isn't it?

Not at all. Let's see why.

By the way, before we dig into this, notice that James is acknowledging **in this passage** that the source of Abraham's being made righteous is based on his belief. James knows that, so something else is going on here.

Here's what's going on. In English we have many words that have more than one meaning. For example, “bed” can mean where you sleep at night OR where you plant flowers in your yard. You can see a sort of similarity (something being laid down or set into in something else) but those are still two separate meanings. And when someone uses the word “bed,” we know which meaning is intended based on how the word is used in its context.

Greek is no different. It has words with more than one meaning, and the word justified that Paul and James use is that kind of word. It has more than one meaning. One meaning of justified is a person being declared righteous by God. That's how Paul uses it to describe how we are made right with God when we believe (We'll call that Meaning #1). But the same Greek word also has a second meaning, which

is: to demonstrate that something is true, to act in a way that verifies a claim is genuine (Meaning #2). This is how James uses the word.

Let me give a great example from Scripture where the word justified word is used in the second meaning by none other than our Lord Jesus. In Luke 7:35, Jesus says “Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”

Is Jesus saying wisdom is made right with a holy God by receiving righteousness that wisdom gains by having kids? (Meaning #1) No! He’s using meaning #2 – proving that a claim is true.

What Jesus is saying here is like the opposite side of Forrest Gump’s mother saying, “Stupid is as stupid does.” Jesus is saying “Wisdom is as wisdom does.” He’s telling us that a claim of wisdom is shown to be genuine by the fruit it produces, i.e., its children. The NIV translates this verse as “Wisdom is **proved right** by all her children” (that wording really captures the essence of meaning #2). If you claim to have wisdom, your claim is justified by your life being characterized by your making wise decisions.

That’s how James is using the word justified in chapter 2. Your faith claim is shown to be genuine by what you do, by the fruit you produce...by your works. That’s what James means when he says you are justified by your works.

Let me give you 3 reasons why we conclude James is using meaning #2.

One obvious reason is because if he meant justified in the first meaning, God is contradicting Himself, and He doesn’t do that! You are EITHER saved by faith, apart from your works, OR you are saved by faith plus works. You can’t have it both ways.

A second reason we know he’s using meaning #2 is because James, like Paul, also uses Abraham to make his point, but he references a point in Abraham’s life decades after Paul’s reference to Abraham being declared righteous by God. James points to Genesis 22 when Abraham offered his son as a sacrifice. James is pointing out that Abraham’s willingness to offer his son as a sacrifice demonstrated that the faith Abraham placed in God years earlier was a genuine faith, a living faith. Abraham

didn't get saved again in chapter 22. And it wasn't as if Abraham's faith he had in chapter 15 was dead until he pumped life into it by his work in Chapter 22.

The third reason we know James is using meaning #2 is based on a principle I heard from Dr. RC Sproul (a very smart theologian). He pointed out that when you're trying to interpret scripture and figure out what a passage means, it can be helpful to **look at what problem the writer is addressing, or what is the question they are answering?**

The problem Paul is addressing, and the question he is answering, is this "How can sinful, unjust people stand in the presence of a just and holy God? The answer? By God declaring us righteous based on our faith in Christ.

James is addressing a different problem and answering a different question. To see that, look at James 2:14ff for context: *"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead."* James 2:14-17

The problem James is dealing with are people who profess faith in Christ, but they don't back it up by their actions, i.e., there is no evidence in their lives to justify their claim. The question James is asking is this: "If a person says he has faith but has no works, no fruit in his life that can back up his claim, can **that** faith save him?" The answer is a resounding No. That person's claim to faith is vain/empty/useless/dead. We know that because genuine faith **does** result in works that reflect that faith.

Paul would agree. In Romans chapter 6, Paul deals with the question of "Can't we just believe but live however we want?" Paul's answer? God forbid! May it never be! It doesn't work that way!

Here's why. At whatever point in your life that you choose to put your faith and trust in Christ a lot happens. You are immediately forgiven, Christ's righteousness is

credited to you, you are washed, you are regenerated, you become a new creature, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in you permanently, and you are adopted in God's family. On the outside, you don't look any different, you don't smell any difference, your weight hasn't changed. But in your heart, your soul, your spirit, all of THAT happened! And there is no way ALL OF THAT is going to happen without it impacting your life going forward.

That doesn't mean you will become perfect overnight. It's a life-long journey. Genuine believers can grow at different speeds. There can be periods of stagnation. Sometimes it's two steps forward, one step back. Sometimes it's one step forward, two steps back. The bible says the righteous may fall 7 times, but what? They get up! Genuine faith will show up in the overall trajectory of your life as spiritual fruit and obedience as you take what's happened to you spiritually on the inside and make it show up on the outside. That's what Paul means when he says, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

Paul is quick to point out that while we are NOT saved BY good works, we ARE saved FOR good works. For example:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before and, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

In Titus, Paul says that we are justified by his God's grace so that we may be careful to devote (our)selves to good works, which are excellent and profitable. Titus 3:7-8

Paul also says in Titus that Christ gave His life to free us from sin and to cleanse us in order to make us a people who are zealous for good works.

So, we see that Paul and James are in 100% agreement, because what are both saying is this: **Genuine faith will show up in the way you live your life.** In other words, **it is faith alone that saves, but the faith that saves is never alone.**

I want to throw something out here to let you chew on. When we think about good works as evidence of our Christianity, it's easy for us to equate good works with "good deeds," i.e., those acts of virtue and kindness to benefit someone in need. E.g.

volunteering at a local charity, feeding the homeless, giving diapers to a single mom, participating in a meal train. Let's call these things "traditional good deeds." I'm not knocking these things, and if you do any of those, keep doing them. They are good and necessary for us to be Jesus to the world around us. And traditional good deeds are a credit to your faith claim (IF you do them willingly and with the right motive and attitude). But in my opinion, that's really not the heart of what we're talking about here. I say that because of the two people James points to whose actions demonstrated their faith in God was genuine. Abraham and Rahab. It wasn't about them doing traditional good deeds. They are mentioned because their actions (or works) **reflected their trust in God**. I think their deeds would be better called "acts of trust."

Consider Abraham. Isaac was not just his only son, but Isaac was the **son of promise**, because it was through Isaac that God's promise to Abraham would be fulfilled. And after giving Abraham and Sarah their promised son, God tells Abraham to take his son to a particular place and sacrifice him on an altar. (By this time Isaac is no longer a child but is a young man.) And because Abraham genuinely believed God back in chapter 15 (you remember, the stars in the sky, his descendants through Isaac), Abraham took Isaac they headed out the next morning. Abraham trusted that God was going to do one of two things: God was either 1) going to provide a substitute for Isaac (which God did) OR 2) if God didn't provide a substitute, God would raise Isaac from the dead (It tells us in Hebrews 11 that was Abraham's mindset). And it wasn't until Abraham raised his hand with the knife to slay Isaac did God say stop. Abraham offering up his son was a monumental act of trust.

What about Rahab the harlot? James used her as an example like Abraham. She was the Canaanite woman who hid the two men Joshua had sent in to spy out the land the Israelites were about to conquer, and she helped them escape (The story is in Joshua chapter 2). Here is what James says: ***And in the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?*** (James 2:25). Wait, these two guys were the enemies! Why would she do such a thing? She did such a thing because she believed in their God.

She told the spies “For the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth below.” (Josh 2:11). Rahab was made right with God not because she hid the spies, but because she believed. But because she believed, she hid spies. If she didn’t believe in God, she wouldn’t have helped them, she would’ve turned them in. Helping the spies was very clearly an act of trust (By the way, as some of you already know, Rahab is also mentioned in the Hebrews 11 faith hall of fame, AND she is in the lineage of Jesus).

My point is this, doing traditional good deeds, while it is fantastic, is not necessarily going to distinguish you from an unbeliever, because unbelievers can do good deeds. Many of them do. But what will distinguish you, what you won’t see is an unbeliever act in a way that reflects their trust in God. Because they don’t trust Him.

Here is the takeaway from my point: When you want to assess how well your life reflects your profession of faith, which is something we all should do periodically, don’t tally up a list of traditional good deeds you’ve done. Instead, make a mental list of your acts of trust. What things have you done or are doing in your life **because you trust in God**. And keep in mind, your acts of trust can be big things, but they can also be little things.

And in that same time of reflection, ponder this “What would my life look like if I 100% fully trusted God all day, every day? Would I do anything differently and would I think anything differently? I know I would. In fact, if you’re like me, it might be difficult to think of an area of life that would **not** be affected in some way for the better IF we 100% fully trusted God.

Hopefully we’ve come to the point where we more fully understand and buy into our Big Idea: **It is faith alone that saves, but the faith that saves is never alone.**

Let me conclude with this. ANYTIME, we are thinking about the role of faith and works in our salvation, we should never lose sight of the cross. Allister Begg (Scottish preacher) says unless we preach the gospel of the cross **to ourselves** all day every day, we will very quickly revert to faith plus works as the ground of our salvation.

Let us never forget that the work of Christ on the cross is sufficient and there is nothing you or I can add to that. If you ever start to question that, think about the

thief on the cross. Before that fateful day, he was not a follower of Jesus. In fact, Matthew tells us earlier in the day, both he and the other thief were ridiculing Jesus like those in the crowd were doing. But at some point during the day while the thief was on the cross, he concluded that Jesus was who he claimed to be. He believed. The real kind of belief. And we know that belief was genuine because look at his incredible act of trust. He looked over at Jesus, and he sees a pitiful, wretched man who is bloody, grievously beaten and scourged, about to die, and yet he says to him “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answers, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” The thief didn’t need any works, did he? All he needed was to trust in Jesus. And when the thief showed up at the gates of heaven and the angels asked, “On what basis are you here?!” All he needed to say was “Jesus said I could come.” And if we have put our faith in Christ, that is all we will need to say as well.

Wherever you are on your journey of trusting Christ or if you’re still wondering whether Jesus is worthy of your trust, you don’t have to work through that alone. Please reach out.

Let’s pray

### **Discussion questions for life groups:**

1. Does the gospel sometimes sound too good to be true? Do you ever have difficulty believing that you don’t have to earn your salvation? If so, why do you think that is?
2. Why do you think Satan has been so successful at getting people to buy into the lie that “I’ll go to heaven if I’m good.”
3. Are there some areas in your life where you have more trouble trusting God than other areas? If so, why do you think that is?
4. How might 100% fully trusting God might affect these areas?
  - Your relationship with your immediate family
  - How you interact with your friends, neighbors, co-workers, or even strangers
  - How you spend your time
  - Your generosity
  - How you think about the future

And just for speculation...

Why do you think God let a prostitute get into the family line of Jesus?