

*“Justified by Works”*

July 1, 2012

Text: James 2:21-24

**In 1889 a Native American medicine man named Wovoka  
declared that he had received a prophetic vision  
during the solar eclipse on January 1 of that year.**

Wovoka (a.k.a. Jack Wilson) had been trained as a medicine man,  
before being taken in by David/Mary Wilson—devout Xns.

Wovoka combined Xnity w/ Native American religious ideas &  
proclaimed that if all Indians would perform a traditional  
Ghost Dance, their dead would be resurrected, and their  
white enemies would be removed from Indian lands.

He said that “Grandfather”—an Indian title for Messiah—  
said they must not hurt anyone, but do right.

He added that, “Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears  
like a cloud.”

Wovoka’s teachings spread quickly among Native Americans,  
esp. the Lakota Tribe, & that created a sense of panic  
among federal officials—esp. leaders of the army.

This atmosphere of unrest ultimately led in 1890 to the  
tragic Massacre at Wounded Knee Creek.

Wovoka’s religion was essentially one of salvation by works, the  
“works” being righteous living, and doing the Ghost Dance.

**Man always gravitates towards the notion that, if he can just  
figure out the right religious thing to do, & then do it,  
he will be saved/blessed.**

He will have made himself acceptable to God.

That “right thing” to earn his salvation might be ghost dancing, bringing offerings to an idol, getting baptized, obeying the 10 Commandments, or simply trying to live a moral life.

**As we were reminded last time, the Bible teaches us that there is absolutely nothing man can do to achieve salvation on his own.**

Only God can save, & only on the basis of His grace through faith in X.

That is the way it has always been, going clear back to Abraham, the father of all those saved by grace, through faith.

**\*\* Rom 4 (Paul)=> “If *Abraham* was *justified* by *works*, he has something to boast about; but *not before God*. / For what does the Scripture say? ‘AND ABRAHAM *BELIEVED* GOD, AND IT WAS *RECKONED* TO HIM AS *RIGHTEOUSNESS*’” (Rom 4:2-3).**

Justification is gained through believing (not through works);

I.e., through faith alone.

Paul was quoting Gen 15:6 here.

**This makes today’s text all the more interesting/surprising, if not enigmatic, because James seems to contradict Paul, even while quoting that same text:**

**“‘ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, & 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*” (Jms 2:23-24).**

Paul had said that it is by faith alone that man is justified.

Now James says it's not.

Did Paul/James disagree about how a person becomes saved?

That would be impossible, in view of the fact that the same H.S. inspired the words of both men.

Part of the answer is found in the fact that Paul was writing to correct the error of Judaizers, who were teaching that faith in X alone was not sufficient to save;

That a person also had to obey the Mosaic Law in addition to believing.

James, on the other hand, was writing to correct the opposite error=>

He was writing to Jewish Xns who seem to have repudiated the Law altogether, arguing that if a person believed in Jesus, God's grace ruled out the need to do any good works.

So Paul was writing about works as a cause of salvation, saying they cannot be the cause.

James was writing about works as the effect/result of salvation, saying they must be that, or one's faith is dead/useless.

James did not teach that man is saved by a combination of Faith + works;

But rather, that true saving faith, transforms a person's heart/character, so that it becomes the pattern of his whole life, to do good/moral/loving deeds.

And in a certain sense (which we will carefully examine today), he is thus “justified by works.”

This is a challenging text.

I learned some new truths as I studied it this week.

But the doctrinal gems we are about to uncover here are truths you will find to be deep, rich, and very rewarding.

**James will make 5 powerful points in this text, by which we can understand this enigma of justification by works...**

- \* Abraham was justified by works
- \* Faith was perfected by works
- \* Scripture was fulfilled by works
- \* Abraham was called a friend of God because of his works
- \* The overarching principle: Man is justified by works.

**\* Abraham Was Justified by Works**

[James 2:21]=> “*Was not Abraham our father **justified by works**, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?*”

Expected answer=> “Yes, he was !”

**There are 2 problems here—1 historical the other theological.**

**The historical problem**=> James is going combine 2 events—one of which took place in Gen 15, and the other in Gen 22, 30 years later.

He is going to take a statement in Gen 15 & applies it to events in Gen 22.

Gen 15:6=> “**ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.**”

Now let's consider those events in [**Gen 22:1-19**].

Gen 15:6 has nothing to do w/ Abraham's sacrificing Isaac.

And yet James will apply it to that sacrifice as if that were indeed the occasion when God reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness, and justified him by his good works.

Gen 15 is about something that had taken place 30 years earlier when God appeared to Abraham & promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky.

Because Abraham believed God's promise, even though he had no children at the time, & his wife Sarah was barren,

Gen 15:6 says God “*reckoned* [accredited] *it* [his faith] *to him as righteousness.*”

The problem=> James takes this earlier statement, applies it carte blanc to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, 30 years later, because he sees an important faith-connection between the 2 events.

The earlier statement about Abraham's faith was ultimately fulfilled to the max in the later event.

James also comes to the conclusion, based on this connection of events, that Abraham was “*justified by works.*”

We will see what James means by that.

**The theological problem**=> is harmonizing James' statement that Abraham was justified by works, w/ Paul's statement that Abraham was justified by faith, apart from works.

\* When Paul wrote in Rom 4 that Abraham was justified "*before God,*" but not by works, he was talking about that earlier vision, which we read about in Gen 15.

\* When James says in our own text, Abraham was "*justified by works,*" he was talking about Gen 22—the sacrifice of Isaac.

And there, the justification wasn't before God, but before men, including Abraham himself, Isaac, Abraham's servants, and everyone who reads in Gen 22 about his sacrifice of Isaac.

**Someone: Wait a minute, that redefines the whole meaning of the doctrine of "*justification.*"**

No, it simply means that the word *justify* itself can have a secondary meaning.

Usually "justified" means to be declared righteous by *God*.

That's the meaning Paul gives it in Rom 4, as he writes=>

*"If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God."*

But "justified" is occasionally used in the Bible to mean

'vindicated before *men,*' and that is its meaning here in James 2.

Paul himself gives "justify" that same meaning in Rom 3=>

*"Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, 'THAT THOU [God] MIGHTEST*

***BE JUSTIFIED IN THY WORDS, AND MIGHTEST  
PREVAIL WHEN THOU ART JUDGED’’ (3:4).***

Paul isn't saying, "Let God be declared righteous" (that's a given), but rather, "Let God be vindicated before men."

Here in James 2, James has just described a man who says to a "believer" who has no good works to show for his belief=>  
***"Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (2:18).***

I.e., vindicate your claim to saving faith, w/o using works to do so (you can't do it!).

Now James adds, "Abraham was able to vindicate his claim of faith by his good works, when he offered up Isaac, his "good works" being his obedience.

"His works justified/vindicated him in men's eyes."

That is the sense in which Abraham was "justified by works"=>

His willingness to obey God & sacrifice his own son, Isaac, vindicated his claim to believe God.

And it justified him before men—in the eyes/minds of men.

That was the crowning proof to men that he had truly been justified before the Lord by his faith, 30 years earlier.

**It's easy to view faith as something you claim to have when it's convenient to do so, & set aside when it's not.**

But the ultimate test of faith is whether/not it continues to control your behavior, when there's a great price to be paid for it.

Maybe the life of someone you love, or even your own life.

Abraham's obedient faithfulness proved that his faith was genuine, when it was put to a very severe test.

Abraham did what God told him to do, & he did it w/o hesitation, even when it meant that he himself would have to kill the person he loved most in this world;

The person on whose life hung all God's promises to him, and all his own hopes for the future.

If you/I truly have saving faith, our faith too would survive the same test God imposed on Abraham.

But God wouldn't test us in that way, unless He knew beforehand that our faith would survive/overcome it, as Abraham's did.

God had known for 30 years how strong Abraham's faith would become, but no one else knew it (not even Abraham).

**\* Faith Was Perfected by Works**

[Verse 22]=> *"You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was **perfected**;"*

**Notice that James does not say that works were working with his faith, but that faith was working with his works.**

Abraham did good works, and his faith worked w/ those works.

His faith animated what he did & gave it its true meaning.

The imperfect tense here means that he kept on doing that.

E.g. Abraham heard that his nephew Lot had been captured by enemy kings, so he set out to rescue him.



Then his faith in the Lord took over, & when it was all said/done, God had enabled him to rescue Lot (through faith w/ works), to give the king of Sodom a powerful testimony of his obedience to God, and to receive a blessing from Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High.

All of this happened through faith working w/ his works (being superimposed on his works).

**As a result of Abraham's continually walking by faith like this, his "*faith was perfected*."**

James says that, because his faith overlaid all his good works, it progressed toward God's goal for every believer's faith=> spiritually mature faith.

That goal was the same goal He has for my faith & yours=>

That it would progress from being the kind of unseen faith that only He in His omniscience can detect;

To the kind of faith that justifies us in men's eyes, because they can see how it has come to dominate our lives.

**Abraham's faith already existed, and it had, ever since he took his first step to leave Ur of the Chaldees & follow God, as He led him to the Promised Land.**

Heb 11:8 says=> "*By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.*"

He was lit. walking by faith, stepping out by faith.

But he still might have turned back.

So Heb 11:9 represents an even greater level of faith=>

*“By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; / for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (9-10).*

This was more than stepping out in faith.

It was living by that faith day after day, and causing his family to do so as well.

But the ultimate vindication of Abraham’s faith took place when he proved he was so obedient to God, he would even sacrifice Isaac, his beloved, only-begotten son of the promise.

Heb 11:17-19=> *“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; / it was he to whom it was said, ‘IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED.’ [God’s covenant depended on a live Isaac] / He considered [logizomai—reasoned] that God is able to raise men even from the dead.”*

Gen 22:7 shows us that at first, Abraham had assumed that God would provide a lamb as a substitute for Isaac.

But when that didn’t seem to happen, Abraham prepared himself & steeled his will to actually slit his own son’s throat on the altar, in obedience to God, and burn up his body as a sacrifice to God.

He believed that God would then resurrect Isaac from the dead, & they would both return down the hill to the servants, who had stayed w/ the donkeys.

Only when Abraham's knife was poised over Isaac's neck did God provide the ram as a substitute sacrifice.

Abraham's faith had triumphed, publicly demonstrating his justification, before men.

And that is the sense in which he was "*justified by works.*"

**Abraham may have shocked himself, when he realized the lengths to which his own faith would take him, as he obeyed his God.**

His faith prob. couldn't have withstood this test back when he first left Ur, but James says his "*faith [had been] perfected*"—it had grown stronger/more-enduring with each test, & with each act of obedience.

It had now reached the climactic goal God had originally set for it.

This is why James tells us=> "*Consider it all **joy**, my brethren, when you **encounter various trials**, / knowing that the **testing** of your faith produces **endurance**. / And let endurance have its perfect result, that **you** may be **perfect** and **complete** [like Abe], lacking in nothing*" (Jms 1:2-4).

Someone: I hope God doesn't think I'm ready for such a test.

Don't worry=> "*No **temptation** [peirasmos—test] has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will **not allow** you to be tempted **beyond** what you are **able***" (I Cor 10:13).

Abraham's faith was perfected/matured/completed by his good works of obedience to God, & ours will be too over the years.

His faith was brought to maturity, becoming fruitful w/ obedient good works, doing the good deeds for which God had saved him, and for which He saves us as well.

Eph 2:10=> *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*

Our faith too will grow more perfect/fruitful, as we obey Him, step by step in our lives.

**\* Scripture was Fulfilled by Works**

[Verse 23a]=> *"and the **Scripture was fulfilled** which says, 'AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,'"*

**Remember, this was the statement made back in Gen 15 when Abraham first believed God's promise of children.**

When he raised the knife over Isaac's neck, the potential of Abraham's initial faith was ultimately realized/"fulfilled."

This is the connection between Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, and God's reckoning his faith as righteousness, 30 years earlier.

It was the ultimate fulfillment of that principle.

He had placed implicit trust in God's character to achieve  
the impossible=> to give him/his-barren wife a  
child/descendants.

He had waited 30 long years for that child's birth.

Then Isaac was finally born, from whom all his  
descendants "as numerous as the stars" were to come.

Now God had commanded Abraham to take Isaac's life,  
before the promise was completely fulfilled.

But still confident that God would yet fulfill His promise,  
Abraham believed God would resurrect Isaac, after  
Abraham had put him to death w/ his own hand.

So confident, in fact, he was ready to plunge in the knife.

That is the level of confident faith God wants to develop in every  
believer, whose faith He reckons as righteousness.

This is the obedience/"fulfillment" by which  
inward/unseen justification by faith, turns into  
outward justification/vindication by works, seen by  
men.

**If this could happen in Abraham's life, it can certainly  
happen in ours.**

We have the whole Word of God w/ which to bolster/build-up  
our faith.

Although God had directly revealed himself to Abraham on  
several occasions, the old patriarch had no Scripture on  
which to establish his faith.

That's because it hadn't yet been written.

But like many other OT saints, he “*welcomed... from a distance*” God's promises, as he understood them.

And he obeyed whatever God told him to do.

God justifies the person who trusts Him, opens up his heart to love the Lord, listens obediently to His Word, & acts on it. If his faith is living faith, it will obey no matter the cost, even taking up its cross and following X.

Abraham had done that all along, but it became evident how far his faith would take that principle, when he sacrificed his only son, Isaac (at least in his heart).

**\* Abraham Was Called a Friend of God Because of Works**

[Verse 23b]=> “*and he was called the friend of God.*”

**Abraham's being “*the friend of God*” means that God regarded him, and treated him, as a friend.**

It doesn't mean that Abraham himself was a friend to God, but rather that God dealt with him as a friend, bringing him into His fellowship/confidence, w/ love/intimacy.

E.g. in Gen 18, God shared with the patriarch His secret plan to judge Sodom, by destroying it (18:17-18), w/ fire from the sky.

**Abraham was recognized among the Jewish people as the “friend of God,” & it became a title of great honor for him.**

Actually, there is no higher title any human being could ever hope to attain in this life.

But if a person w/ that title became foolishly proud, he might abuse the privilege, & treat God contemptuously as if he were God's equal.

But Abraham never abused his privileged status like that. He humbly served/obeyed God—his Friend.

A true friend of God will always serve/obey Him, remembering that God is still God, & he himself is just a man, a creature of God's making.

**Someone: “Abraham was indeed highly honored w/ such a title as ‘the friend of God,’ but we could never attain it.”**

Not so!

Jesus (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Godhead) told His disciples=>

*“You are My **friends**, if you do what I **command** you. / No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:14-15).*

Jesus invites us to be His friends, thus becoming friends of God.

None of us should neglect the possibility of such an honor.

None of us should content ourselves w/ a scanty measure of God's grace, w/ such abundance of joy w/i our reach.

Not only would it be the waste of a golden opportunity, it would be outright wrong to say, “I just hope to get to Heaven by the skin of my teeth.”

We should prepare ourselves for Glory in the largest possible measure of God’s grace, gaining as much of heaven even now as we can have.

As Peter put it=> *“For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be **abundantly supplied** to you”* (2 Pet 1:11).

You won’t wash up on heaven’s shore like survivors having narrowly escaped disaster.

You’ll arrive there enjoying all the spiritual amenities of a first-class cabin, on the good ship, God’s Grace.

We should aspire to grow in grace, and increase in love for God and closeness of access to Him, so that He might lift us up, like Abraham, to be called His friends.

**\* The Principle: Man Is Justified by Works**

[Verse 24]=> *“You see that [here’s the conclusion, and the principle we should take away from this text] a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”*

**Again, let’s remind ourselves of what James means by that.**

No one is saved by performing good works, because God justifies man by his grace alone, on the basis of faith alone.

We surrender to His grace w/o trying to add our own works to it.



But truly-saving faith is something internal that only God sees.

However, other people should be able to see our good works, as the outward evidence of our unseen/internal faith.

True saving faith always produces outward fruit, by which others can recognize the life of God w/i us.

And in that sense, we are “*justified*” before men a/w/a God, by the good works we do.

Ultimately, we can become a friend of God, like Abraham, through the consistency of lives that glorify Him.

**“Friend of God” is a title to which every Xn should aspire.**

Do you aspire to that great title of honor?

If so, you must 1<sup>st</sup> become reconciled to God through faith in Jesus X.

If He has not forgiven your sin, you cannot be His friend.

But if you are pardoned thru X’s sacrifice, justified by His righteousness, & regenerated by His Spirit, you are no longer God’s enemy, but are reconciled to Him.

That alone, however, doesn’t entitle you to be called His friend.

God’s grace must bring you into a condition of tender love & fervent desire, towards the Lord.

2<sup>nd</sup>, The H.S. must make us like God, if we are to become His friend.

We must obey Him, just as Jesus told the Apostles they  
were His friends if they did what He commanded.

Would God treat someone as a friend who despises His  
holiness, is careless about obeying Him, & has no  
interest in His purposes,, or delight in His Son?

If we don't truly love Jesus the Son, we cannot love God,  
the Father.

Any Xn whose life is ruled by selfishness is self-deceived,  
if he thinks God will call him His friend, since God  
isn't selfish Himself, nor is He a Friend of the selfish.

3<sup>rd</sup>, to become a true friend of God, we must commune with Him.

Friends love to spend time in each other's company.

A friend of God must abide in Him, & walk w/ Him daily,  
undertaking no work apart from seeking God's help.

His faith must "work with" his works.

He must live *with* God, and *in* God, & *for* God, & *like* God.

**The Lord's Table is a high point of a true friend's  
communion with his beloved Savior/God—Christ Jesus.**

As we come to Communion we can say with the old hymn=>

Here would I feed upon the bread of God  
Here drink with Thee the royal wine of heaven;  
Here would I lay aside each earthly load,  
Here taste afresh the calm of sin forgiven.

## ***“Justified by Works”***

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Text: James 2:21-24

1. The Bible teaches us that there is absolutely nothing man can [6 do] to achieve salvation.

Rom 4:2-3; Gen 15:6; Jms 2:23-24

2. But true saving faith transforms a person's heart and character so that it becomes the pattern of his whole life to [6 do] good, moral, loving deeds.

**James will make five powerful points in this text...**

### **\* Abraham Was Justified by Works**

**[James 2:21]**

#### **The historical problem**

Gen 15:6

**[Gen 22:1-19].**

#### **The theological problem**

3. When Paul wrote that Abraham was justified “*before God*” but not by works, he was talking about Gen 15; when James says Abraham was “*justified by works*,” he was talking about Gen 22, and justification before [8 men].

Rom 3:4; Jms 2:18

4. Abraham was able to vindicate his claim of faith by his good works, when he offered up Isaac *before men's eyes*; that is the sense in which Abraham was [20 justified] by works.

### **\* Faith Was Perfected by Works**

**[Verse 22]**

5. Abraham did good works, and his faith “worked with” those works; his faith animated what he did and gave it its true [16 meaning].

Heb 11:8, 9-10

6. The ultimate vindication of Abraham's faith took place when he proved he was so obedient to God he would even [20 sacrifice] Isaac.

Heb 11:17-19; Gen 22:7; Jms 1:2-4; I Cor 10:13

7. Abraham's faith was perfected, matured, and completed by his good works of obedience to God, and [10 ours] will be too.

Eph 2:10

**\* Scripture was Fulfilled by Works**

**[Verse 23a]**

8. When Abraham raised the knife over Isaac's neck, the potential of Abraham's initial faith was ultimately realized and [20 fulfilled].
9. This is the obedience and "fulfillment" by which inward, unseen justification by faith turns into outward justification by [12 works].

**\* Abraham Was Called a Friend of God Because of Works**

**[Verse 23b]**

10. Abraham's being "*the friend of God*" means that God regarded him and [16 treated] him as a friend.

Gen 18:17-18; Jn 15:14-15; II Pet 1:11

11. We should aspire to grow in grace and increase in love for God and closeness of access to Him, so that He might lift us up like Abraham, to be called His [16 friends].

**\* The Principle: Man Is Justified by Works**

**[Verse 24]**

12. Other people should be able to see our good works as the outward [20 evidence] of our unseen faith.
13. A friend of God must abide in Him and walk with Him daily, undertaking no work apart from seeking God's help; he must live *with* God, and *in* God, & *for* God, & [10 like] God.