

The Working of Works: James 2:20-26

A story in keeping with the season.

The lightning crashes as the platform descends from the stormy heights.

Lowering into view comes the body, strapped in place with thick metal bands.

The scientist draws near, closely examining, looking, searching...

Then - the hand twitches! The chest heaves! The arm raises! And the scientist declares:

“Look! It’s moving! It’s alive! Alive!!”

From the classic 1931 film “Frankenstein,” of course.

In today’s passage as we continue through the book of James, we see how he’s going to illustrate another set of Biblical principles in order to demonstrate to us the effectiveness and proper ordering and perspective - of what we might call the working of works.

James has spoken of that same working since the middle of chapter one, using different phrases to describe the same operation.

In verse 22 of that chapter, for example, he says to:

“be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

Note once again, as we did before, that simple hearing without attendant action is being held out as a deception, because - faith without works is dead

Verse 25 of that chapter encourages us to “continue” in that “perfect Law of Liberty,” showing an ongoing walk or path which we traverse in that faith. Again, James specifically points out, not to “earn,” not to “justify,” but our continuance in “Liberty” - that Liberty which is found in Christ Jesus.

Chapter 2 verse 12 has James commanding us to:

“so speak, and so Do as those who will be judged by”

- once again, that clarifying note-

“... the Law of Liberty.”

See again and again how James shows that the grace of Christ both frees and motivates the believer, making us alive.

So, after James gives examples of counterfeit belief and intellectual assent, and has shown them to be entirely unsatisfactory in comparison with a living faith, we now find ourselves at the end of this topic in chapter 2, where James gives us not one but two very powerful and yet different examples of a living faith in action - a working of faith.

In so doing, he’s going to show us three effects of works upon faith, effects which define and clarify the roles and actions by which works engage our faith. You’ll see them listed on your bulletin on the right hand side, so have a look along with me as we see firstly in verse 21 that

1) v21: Works present evidence of the faith of the believer

Second, James reiterates the Biblical principle that

2) v22: Works “complete” a believer’s faith

Then, lastly, James uses a very contrasting example to demonstrate the wonderful truth of how:

3) Works demonstrate the impartiality of God’s Grace

We’ll get into those in a moment, but before we do, we need to note the challenge James presents in verse 20, as he asks:

(read verse 20)

The tone of the question is one of - well, of exasperation. James is trying to impress upon us the vital importance of understanding this concept. That phrase, “would you know” is actually imploring us that we would desperately desire to gain an understanding of this topic.

He’s saying “Would you get it through your thick empty heads already?”

To get a clearer sense of the tone, Jesus uses the same tense in John 16:29 at the Last Supper, as the disciples say:

“See, now you are speaking plainly and using no figure of speech,”

and wrap up by saying

“We believe that You came forth from God!”

To which Jesus replies, in equal parts joy and fatigue:

"Now do you believe?" (v31)

James is pleading with that same tone here, so we need to make additional efforts to grasp the concepts he's been laying out in this section.

This brings us to his first example, that of Abraham and Issac, in which James shows how:

1) v21: Works present evidence of the faith of the believer

He says:

(read v21 and 22a)

The most immediate thing we need to get straight is what James means by this word, "justified," because many will - and have! - taken this very passage to argue a works-based righteousness. Some would have you believe that the entire package of Christ is dependant in some part or in total upon **our** performance, **our** obedience to the Law of Moses - even though James has **just** argued the very opposite for nearly two chapters!

As James just said in verses 10 and 12:

"For whoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all!

So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the Law of Liberty!"

From that, it's clear that James is in no way saying that works save, nor sanctify, nor 'justify,' nor glorify, as if one could attain a standing of righteousness in the sight of God through works.

What, then, does James mean when he asks:

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?"

Well, Strong's concordance tells us that the word 'justified' - *edikaiothe* - can also mean:

"... to show, exhibit, evince one to be righteous. "

James is pointing out that Abraham's actions in Genesis 22 weren't what made him righteous, but rather, they caused his righteousness to be demonstrated and exhibited.

Paul confirms this to be the case in Romans 4, listen to this, Paul says:

"For if Abraham was justified (meaning, 'made righteous') by works, he has something to boast about! But not before God." (Romans 4:2)

And again from Romans, this time in chapter 3 verse 23 where Paul says that **God** is:

"... both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

So we understand from Scripture itself that this 'justifying' spoken of by James is not a recompensing action, it's not a "righteousness-earning" action - that action belongs to God alone, through Christ - but James instead is speaking of 'justifying' in the sense of an evidentiary display of evidence to men - *just* as he explained earlier in verse 18 when he says:

“I will show you my faith by my works.”

James has been leaning heavily on this concept. It's one of the things he most wants us to understand - that proper perspective of the position of works in this chain of events. Once again, James is showing that works do not save, works do not preserve, works do not sanctify - instead, the role of works is to open a window and make evident to all something which is already true and active in us - our Faith.

This is that same theme which James has been presenting even from the first - that our showing of love one for another, in all those varying ways, are examples of how we demonstrate a living and genuine faith for everyone to see. This happens for all - believers and unbelievers alike - as Thomas Manton notes in his “Exposition of James.” Listen to what he says, I quote him here, Manton says:

“God will evince the faith of His saints to be right by producing their works -”

(notice once again it is God producing these works in us, but Manton continues :)

**“God will evince the faith of His saints to be right by producing their works,
and will discover the ungrounded hopes of others by their works also,
for - great and small - all are judged according to that rule.**

**And not only hereafter, but now also doth God judge according to works:
that is, look upon them as testimonies and declarations of faith.**

‘Now I know that thou fearest God,’ that is, now I have an experience; upon which experience Abraham was justified and the promise renewed.“

When James tells us “faith without works is dead,” he’s pointing out how God will use means, and trials and tests, blessings and calamities, all to give opportunity to display the life and activity of that faith He Himself has given us - it is from Him, remember, as the Apostles cried:

“Lord, increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5)

... so God will put us in whatever situation He sees fit, with whatever tools or trials He deems necessary, in order that we might glorify God for all men to see, through our actions in faith.

What applications can we make from this principle?

The first one is this, it’s actually an encouraging one as far as I’m concerned, get this:

application 1:

“Past performance is not always indicative of future results.”

Ever hear that before? (repeat.)

Let’s consider Abraham.

Genesis 12, God says “Leave your father’s house and go to a land I will show you.”

He leaves, he goes, he arrives in Canaan -

and he sees the land is in famine and he just keeps on going.

All the way down to Egypt.

Fear of meeting your basic daily needs and provision.

Fail!

Later with Pharaoh: “ *Why did you not tell me she was your wife?* ”

Fear of what the Authorities may say or do to you and yours.

“You lied to me, Abraham!”

Fail!

Genesis 15, God appears to Abraham and says

“Do not be afraid! I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward!”

And Abraham answers

“Oh yeah? Where’s that kid you promised me all those years ago?”

Talk is cheap - how do I **know**?”

Fear that God is unwilling to keep His promises - believing that they don’t apply to you.

Fail!

Genesis 16, still no kid and Sarah says “Maybe we should do it the way they do here in Canaan.”

And when Abraham gets Hagar pregnant, Sarah blames Abraham!,

saying “*The wrong be upon you!*”

This is **your** fault!

Fear that you’ve mis-understood the clear words of God - because you expected something to happen in a different time or a different way.

Fail!

Over and over again with Abraham - Fail! Fail! Fail!

And when God has finally delivered?

When Abraham has that son of the promise, God says:

“Offer him as a burnt offering to Me.”

What do you think Abraham is likely to do?

I think we know what his track record would say, right?

Yet - Abraham obeys.

Past performance is not always indicative of future results.

The fact is that past performance IS almost always indicative of future actions, but by God's grace, that wasn't the case in this instance - Abraham had learned, from his many failures, to trust God.

Thank God, past performance is not always indicative of future results.

Another thing to notice in application:

Application 2:

Successful tests of faith - in the end - manifest obedience.

Consider once again all of Abraham's failings.

He left Haran for Canaan - and refused to stay there.

He lied to gain and protect his place in Pharaoh's court.

He took God's plan into his own hands and gave his wife's handmaiden Hagar a son.

We may wish to feel safe, or to have an earthly confidence that we have no needs - or even to think that we're taking the lead in what we believe to be God's plan for our lives. But, as seen with Abraham, these actions are all failures without God.

There was a famine in Canaan - but later, God increased Abraham abundantly.

There was fear that Pharaoh would kill Abraham and take his wife - yet later, Abraham's household was grown to an army great enough to hunt down the Elamite king Chedorlaomer in Genesis 14 to rescue his nephew.

And we're all familiar with how God gave Isaac, the son of the promise, to Abraham and Sarah.

Our obedience is one more thing that only God can give, as the Psalmist said:

*"Teach me to do Your will,
for you are my God." (Psalm 143:10)*

God's tests of faith - naturally! - require obedience. But we lack that ability, in the "natural" man. So just as God has chosen us, called us, redeemed us, sanctified us, glorified us and done it all through that living union with Christ, do you think God will then leave us without the ability to do what He asks?

Certainly not! As we know from 2 Peter 1:3:

*“His divine power has given us
all things that pertain to life and godliness
through the knowledge of Him who called us
by His glory and virtue.”*

And we can all agree that obedience pertains to life and godliness.

This is why **successful tests of faith will - in the end - manifest obedience.**

And that’s why we can have confidence in knowing that **works will present evidence of the faith of the believer** - by God’s own design.

Having shown us one of the purposes of works, how it serves to illuminate and demonstrate a believer’s faith, James is now excited to reveal another one of the functions of works in our lives. He does this in verse 22 as he shows us his second point, seen on your outline, how:

2) v22: Works complete a believer's faith

Let's read verse 22 again: (read it)

Okay, another tricky word sequence here! But let's not make the mistake, as some have done throughout the ages, of reading this to mean that faith is imperfect, is flawed, is incomplete and - here's the most important thing - let's not read this as implying that God requires us to Do Something in order to 'finish the job.'

Scripture assures us that this is not the case, hear me here - the Bible confirms that there is nothing lacking, nothing to which we "need" to contribute! We know this because this same word is used in Philippians 1:6 when we're told we should be:

"... **confident** (stress it) *of this very thing: That He who has begun a good work in you*

(hey, there's that work again - who's doing it? God's doing it!)

*... that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it **until** the day of Jesus Christ."*

God will keep it whole, **God** will supply any lack, **God** will make up any difference, it's all God all day all night 24-7 until Christ comes because Complete means Complete, so when we hear James say how:

"by works, faith was made perfect,"

... we can only agree with Scripture that we're speaking of God working, in us and through us, using circumstances and means - just like we've been speaking all morning - in order to bring

our already-present faith into view.

And also - here's the important part - just like Philippians shows, God will **use** those works to supplement and bolster and educate and illuminate and grow our faith, to whatever degree God Himself finds necessary.

Think of all the things God has expressed as His will for us! Romans alone is packed with them!

Here's Romans 8:28:

"For whom He (God) foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son..."

Or how about Romans 12:2:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind

(and why?) -

that you may prove (meaning, that you may 'show' or 'demonstrate evidence,' to the world and yourself)

what is that good and acceptable and perfect (!! there it is again!) will of God."

One of the points James is making, and has been making for two chapters now, is that these things don't happen in a vacuum. You don't just "believe" and that's the end, you don't just offer a mental agreement, some intellectual "nod of the head" and that's the end of the believer's walk up until the day we die or Christ returns in glory.

It doesn't work that way - though, sadly, there are lots of Christians out there who think that this is precisely the way salvation works.

Are you one of those?

Do you think agreement with the Gospel presentation is the end of your experience? I hope not!

Because one result of that mindset is a really difficult Christian walk.

When you look upon circumstance as coincidence, or chance - or, worse yet, as divine punishment, or as retribution or demonic attack or any number of things when - in actuality - it's God working to grow you in faith and conformity, when you treat these provings as a detriment or a setback, you are not allowing that iron file of God to get to work on you.

The point James is making here is that all of our circumstances are divinely appointed, they all have a purpose, and God is using both the events; and also how He prompts us to respond to them; in order to operate alongside our faith to make us complete.

Also note, One! More! Time!

"Do you see that faith was working together with his works..."

It's right there in Scripture, don't let anyone tell you otherwise, it's in black and white right there:

Works. Are. Not. Faith!

Rather, works are both a means and a conduit by which faith operates, in the Body of Christ and the world at large. Works are a blessing to believers and also a testimony to unbelievers:

for believers, as in: John 14:1:

*“Believe Me! That I am in the Father, and the Father in Me;
or, else, believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.”*

And for unbelievers: John 10:23-25:

“Jesus walked in the temple - in Solomon’s porch.

Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him:

‘How long do you keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly!’

Jesus answered them:

‘I told you - and you do not believe!

The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me!

But you do not believe - because you are not of My sheep.’“

An application here is one we’ve had from an earlier part in James, but he’s still making the point that:

Believers should actively look for ways to bring blessing to their brothers and sisters.

Remember that one?

Last time, James’ reason was because it allows us to bring God’s blessing to others.

That’s still true!

Yet today we see another benefit, another reason, and it’s because seeking to bless our brothers and sisters in Christ is God’s most common and immediate way to exercise our faith.

Jesus tells us:

“A new commandment I give you: that you love one another.

As I have loved you, that you also love one another.” (John 13:34)

and the apostles all agree. John says:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God,

and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” (1 John 4:1)

Peter adds:

“Above all things

(above *all* things!! wow - Peter says this is the most important part!)

“Above all things, have fervent love for one another,

for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’ “ (1 Peter 4:8)

and Paul:

“The purpose of the commandment is love:

from a pure heart,

from a good conscience,

*and from sincere **faith**.”* (1 Tim 1:5)

So James illustrates for us how we can grow and mature, from faith to faith,

and do so in keeping with - and sharing - the love God has for us and for His people.

This is why **seeking to be a blessing to our brothers and sisters** is a believer's most recommended method to demonstrate that : works complete a believer's faith.

That theme of “working in love” lies at the heart of James’ third and final point in this chapter, point #3 on your outline is this:

3) Works demonstrate the impartiality of God’s Grace

Through this chapter, we’ve heard much from James about Abraham, yes?

Abraham, that great Patriarch, the Father of our Faith. If you flip over to Hebrews 11, Scripture’s famous Hall of Faith, you’ll see Abraham there alongside other notables like Noah, Jacob and Moses. Mighty men and women of valor!

Now your everyday Christian may look at one’s self and say: “Such great leaders and prophets - what am I compared to them?”

This is why James is reminding us of Rahab - right here alongside Abraham, and we get her completely unvarnished in verse 25.

(read v25)

James, the master of contrasts, has the Father of Nations walking right beside a prostitute from Jericho. Why?

Because both go hand in hand, taking action based in the same faith!

Joshua 2 tells Rahab's story, and it is ours as well.

Like us, she has seen and understood the Lord in His true majesty, as she says in Joshua 2:11:

*"As soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted,
neither did there remain any more courage in anyone, because of you -
for the LORD - your God - He IS God...."*

And like us, Rahab trusted that the Lord that would hear her prayer as she spoke to the emissaries in verses 12 and 13:

*"Therefore I beg you ... show kindness to my Father's house,
and give me a true token,
and spare my father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters,
and all that they have,
and deliver our lives from death!"*

Rahab believed - and so Rahab acted - because of her faith!

Like Abraham, Rahab believes, and through God's grace, is able to put that faith into action as

James reminds us:

"... when she received the messengers and sent them out another way..."

Rahab's faith - just as Abraham's - are shown to be genuine by their actions.

There is no doubt that Rahab believes in God, there is no question that she trusts that He is faithful to save both her and her entire household, and while the rest of the city quaked in fear,

God sent messengers straight to Rahab's door to give her an opportunity to act on that belief.

And what was the result?

Rahab was saved - her father's entire house was saved!

Not only that, but Joshua 6 tells us her family " ... *dwells in Israel to this day.*"

How notable was this faith?

Good enough to see her standing alongside Sarah in Hebrews 11 as an example of a faithful woman of God, that's how remarkable.

Now let me ask: Do you think Rahab knew Scripture? Would you say there was anything about her that would indicate she was a woman who had lived a godly life so far?

No, not by any stretch of the imagination. A 'harlot,' through and through!

Yet God used the working of her faith to move in a more mighty way than the best efforts of powerful kings and generals.

Acting in faith, the same as Abraham, demonstrated Rahab's justification, as Pastor Pat unpacked for us in Romans:

"The just shall live by faith."

So while James is contrasting that great patriarch with the 'lowly' Rahab,
(see how the world would see them?)

James would show us that they are the same, acting on that same faith - in Christ and of Christ.

But that's not the end of Rahab!

Because Matthew tells us that Rahab married a man named Salmon,
and bore him a son named Boaz.

Boaz became that kinsman redeemer
who married the Moabite widow Ruth and sheltered her mother Naomi,

Boaz, whose great grandson was David

Boaz - whose descendant was Christ Jesus.

The working out of Rahab's faith brought her into the same family as Christ - and so it is with us!

"God shows no partiality,

But, in every nation, whoever fears Him and works righteousness

is accepted by Him." (Acts 10:34)

God showed no distinction because He views Rahab as much of a child of the promise as He does Abraham - and James would have us realize and believe that God sees us that very same way!

Listen to these words from Hudson Taylor, a man who spent 51 years preaching Christ in China in the 19th century. He says, listen closely:

"God is not looking for men of great faith."

Let me say that one more time -

"God is not looking for men of great faith.

He is looking for common men to trust His great faithfulness."

That's on your bulletin, on the right hand side in blue.

Cut that out and tape it to your mirror this afternoon, won't you?

"God is not looking for men of great faith.

He is looking for common men to trust His great faithfulness."

One last note on the mention of Rahab - a hidden gem here to dig up in verse 26, let's read:

(read v26)

The word 'spirit' is "*pneuma*," meaning - among other things - "breath."

John is giving us a practical example - as he always does - when he says:

"For as the body without breath - *pneuma* - is dead,
so faith without works is dead also."

An easy sight to imagine, right? Think of the movies and TV shows you've seen.

The character is in distress and runs up to the ambulance workers, the EMTs, and cries out:

"I think he's dead!"

And the first question they ask is:

"Is he breathing?"

(this is intended to be a run-on sentence)

You don't need any more evidence that this person is alive, of course they're alive, they're breathing. They're not thinking about it, they're not concentrating on it, they're not doing it for show and then turning it off when they get back home later in the afternoon. It's a natural, instinctive reaction and more necessary for living minute-by-minute than any other thing because if you can't breathe then you're definitely not going to be alive for very long and are you getting James' point yet my brothers and sisters?

Because don't kid yourself, get it in your heads, we were dead, dead, dead I say!

"And YOU! Being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh

He has made alive,

together with Him,

*having forgiven you *all* your trespasses!" (Col 2:13)*

And Pastor Pat has just spent great time and care to show us the truth of Romans 6, where Paul tells us:

"If we have been planted -

(you're in the dirt, can we get any more descriptive?)

together in the likeness of His death,

we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection." (Romans 6:5)

So let's not miss the wider application here - hopefully you all raised a flag when you saw the

word “body,” yes? Just as we ourselves have to be breathing, so also does the wider Body of Christ need that breath, that Holy Spirit moving, bringing life and air into this fellowship, into all the churches here in town, in the nation and the world. That’s why you see it translated the way it is here.

And that’s another reason James is ending his entire discussion on this subject with this clear comparison:

*“As a body without the spirit is dead,
so faith without works is dead also.”*

So. I end with a question.

Are - You - Breathing?

You know the answer to that, you don’t need me to watch if your hand flutters or your chest raises, to shout out “It’s Alive!”

Lazarus didn’t have to say a word. He just walked down the street and people knew - because he wasn’t supposed to be walking at all.

Neither are we, because we were dead in our sins and trespasses, weren’t we?

Yet now we have a new command - Pastor Pat just unpacked it for us in Romans 6!

“Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in the newness of life.”

Are you still dead? Are you bound in the wrappings of death?

Would you be free of your sin?

Jesus calls to you:

“ ‘Come forth!’ ”

And if you are indeed alive, then let's walk, and work, together.

*“Now, may the God of peace,
who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead,
that great Shepherd of the sheep,
through the blood of the everlasting covenant,
make you **complete**
in every good **work**
to do His will
working in you what is well pleasing in **His** sight
through Jesus Christ
to Whom be glory forever and ever. Amen!”*

(Hebrews 13:20-21)