

James 2:14-26
Justification by Works
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This is the key passage in the Bible for justification by works. Look at the phrases I have bolded in verses 21, 24, and 25. Each one speaks of a person being “justified” or “considered righteous” (Greek dikaioo) by works. I quote and paraphrase James 2:14-26 in four paragraphs, adding comments throughout and at the end.

A. Without Works the Faith One Claims is Worthless, 2:14-17

NIV	Paraphrase	Comments
<p>^{14*} What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?</p> <p>¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.</p> <p>¹⁶ If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?</p> <p>¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.</p>	<p>¹⁴ I address fellow Jews who profess to believe in Jesus Messiah. What do you think of Person A, who says he believes in Jesus but does not obey Him? Can the belief he professes make him right with God?</p> <p>¹⁵⁻¹⁶ His belief is no better than the empty words used to encourage a fellow believer who is freezing and starving. Such words, unless they are accompanied by clothes or food, are useless.</p> <p>¹⁷ So is belief in Messiah useless if there is no obedience with it.</p>	<p>¹⁴ “Brothers” can—but does not always—refer to true believers. In Acts 22:1 Paul used it for fellow Jews who were trying to kill him. “Can such faith save him?” assumes the answer No. “Such” represents the Greek article, which identifies this “faith” as the faith just claimed by Person A. Other suitable translations would be “that faith,” “that kind of faith,” or “his faith.”</p>

B. Without Works Faith Cannot be Demonstrated, 2:18-19

NIV	Paraphrase	Comments
<p>¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.</p> <p>¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.</p>	<p>¹⁸ As just stated, Person A professes to believe but has not obeyed Messiah. Person B challenges A to prove his belief without such evidence. B, in contrast, has such evidence of his own belief.</p> <p>¹⁹ A has an orthodox Jewish creed. So do demons. But orthodoxy does not save demons—nor anyone else.</p>	<p>¹⁸⁻¹⁹ NIV, assuming that Person B wants to separate faith from works, concludes his words in the middle of v. 18. My interpretation assumes that Person B begins with irony and continues at least through v. 19.</p>

C. Abraham & Rahab as Scriptural Examples of Justification by Works, 2:20-25

NIV	Paraphrase	Comments
<p>²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?</p> <p>²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?</p> <p>²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.</p> <p>²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.</p> <p>²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.</p> <p>²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?</p>	<p>²⁰ For person A here is proof from Scripture that belief without obedience as evidence is no good.</p> <p>²¹ The first example is Abraham, the forefather of all Jews. Late in life God approved him because in obedience to God he put his promised son on an altar to sacrifice him.</p> <p>²² Abraham’s belief did not remain hidden but matured through such acts of obedience.</p> <p>²³ Years before, his belief had been counted as a proper standing before God. Now it had matured into character that God highly approved.</p> <p>²⁴ A person is declared right not only when he believes in God—but also by many acts that show he is transformed.</p> <p>²⁵ Just as in Abraham’s case, the Canaanite prostitute Rahab was declared right for her action. She did not just secretly believe but aided God’s cause at her own risk.</p>	<p>²⁰ Some who limit Person B’s words to v. 18a assume that he is the “foolish man.” I think that man is A.</p> <p>²¹ This Greek question assumes a Yes answer. I have made it a statement. NIV’s phrase “was considered righteous” and my verb “approved” represent Greek <i>edikaiothe</i>, which KJV translates “was justified.”</p> <p>²² “His faith was made complete” (“Faith was perfected,” NASB). The Greek verb, which I have given as “matured,” is literally “carried to the end.”</p>

D. Summary, 2:26

NIV	Paraphrase	Comments
<p>²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.</p>	<p>²⁶ Supposedly believing in Messiah without acting on it is no better than having a body without breath.</p>	

Added Comment on Two Categories of Justification

The Greek noun for justification (*dikaiosis*) is seldom used in the New Testament. However, the verb for justify (*dikaioo*) is used often. The verb does not mean “make righteous” but “declare to be righteous.” That is clear in the apostle Paul’s first use of it in Romans: “It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who **will be declared righteous**” (Rom. 2:13). Note that this is a future justification (“will be”).

In James 2:14-26 *dikaioo* occurs in verses 21, 24, and 25. In two of them (21, 25) the NIV translates it “consider righteous.” In all three verses the King James Version translates it “justify,” as it usually does elsewhere (e.g., Rom. 3:28; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 8:30).

The doctrine of justification, however, does not depend on the use of a term like *dikaiosis* or *dikaioo*. A statement or action of approval can be justification without calling it that. Thus, James argues for two categories of justification based on God’s responses to Abraham and Rahab. Here we will call those categories (1) original justification and (2) subsequent justification.

1. Original justification is complete at the first moment of faith in Messiah. At this point the newborn believer has no good works to show. Yet, God counts as righteous this person “who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked” (Rom. 4:5; see 4:2-5, 3:20, 26, 28). He is declared righteous because the righteousness of Messiah is “imputed” to his account.
2. Subsequent justification is based on the good works that show the reality of faith. These are works of obedience to Messiah Jesus. They justify the believer in the sense of vindicating him, proving that he belongs to God and His Son. This evidence begins immediately after conversion and continues as true faith matures. Therefore, subsequent justification will occur many times for each believer.

Only God can see the faith bringing the original justification. But both men and God can see the works that spring from faith. Paul’s writings usually emphasize original justification; however, see Romans 2:13 (quoted above); 8:2-5; and Galatians 5:5-6 (cf. 1 Cor. 13:2-3). James 2 definitely refers to both.

Can a person have original justification without subsequent justification? Only if he first believes at the same moment when he is dying. For though it is true that faith alone saves, saving faith never remains alone.