

MYTH *11*

Works Required



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*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, so that you may be perfect [mature] and complete, lacking in nothing.*

James 1:2-4

*Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that **faith** was working with his works, and as a result of the works, **faith** was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham **believed** God, and 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.*

James 2:21-24

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ETERNAL LIFE IS A GIFT

While teaching one of my seminary classes, I made a theological distinction between two biblical ideas. It was a quick comment, but it resonated with one of the students. I was asked to repeat what I had just said. So, I said again, “You are saved by grace, but you are justified by faith.” As the entire class reflected on the statement, further discussion quickly showed that this was a thought they had never considered. The remainder of the classtime was spent discussing the difference between the two.

Some may say, “You are making much about nothing. It’s all about regeneration. It makes little difference.” However, my experience is that most believers are sloppy when it comes to noting distinctions in biblical concepts. Frankly most believers unfortunately do not study the Scriptures to any extent and only have a cursory understanding of the Bible. As a result, ignorance leads to apathy and unquestioning acceptance of whatever they hear from those they respect, whether from the pulpit, Christian radio, Christian conferences, or Christian books. Their thought is, “Because so-in-so said it and supported it from the Bible, it must be true, since he knows more than I do!”

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Fog Lights Needed

Three concepts must be addressed to lift the fog regarding justification.

All Works Are Not Equal

In Ephesians 2:9-10, two different kinds of works are discussed. Note that in this passage the works mentioned are the works of man, not God. Paul's distinction is the *motivation* behind the works. In verse 9, "[Salvation is] not as a result of works, that no one should boast," the reference to works relates to those performed in order to earn initial salvation. We can do nothing nor add anything to God's gift of salvation. In verse 10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works," works refer to those that follow initial salvation. The New Testament abounds with numerous commands and God expects His children to obey. When believers obey, God is pleased and longs to reward their faithfulness. Good works earn merit before God for future rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ and in no way relate to gaining or keeping eternal life (2 Cor. 5:10). Growing intimacy in fellowship with Christ, in our present life, is the result of a consistent walk in good works (James 1:12, 25, 2:23). Rewards are the end result of that steady walk in fellowship with Christ.

Justification Times Two

While there is only one way to receive eternal life, that being faith alone in Christ apart from any works, God's Word speaks of two kinds of justifications—one by faith and one by works. Justification by faith refers to the legal pronouncement in which one is declared to have a righteous standing before God—*as a result of faith*. In Romans 5:1, Paul wrote, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

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Justification by works also refers to a legal pronouncement. It too is to have a righteous standing before God—*as a result of works*. Obviously when referring to justification by works, the works under consideration are the “good works” previously discussed in Ephesians 2:10. These are the same good works to which James referred when he asked, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?” (James 2:21). Yes is the expected answer. James then concluded the illustration of Abraham with the statement, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (v. 24). Justification by faith “announces the true and actual state of the person”—the permanent status, having been declared righteous before God because of the death of Christ.¹ Justification by works, on the other hand, speaks of the consistency of the believer’s life, which reflects his new position in Christ through obedience. Justification by faith is realized at initial salvation; justification by works can be experienced during our Christian life, as we live in harmony with God’s Word.²

Abraham is the illustration of a believer whose obedient actions reflect his heavenly position. Growth in maturity is the point James was making in reference to the experience of Abraham (vv. 21-24). He began by quoting Genesis 15:6, “He [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He reckoned [counted] it to him as righteousness.” James then referred to Genesis 22:1-12 and said that Genesis 15:6 was “fulfilled” [accomplished or completed] when Abraham “offered up his son.” The Genesis 15 incident concerned

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justification by faith, while Genesis 22 addressed justification by works. Abraham's spiritual position confirmed in Genesis 15:6 had become a reality in his life. His actions reflected who he already was in his standing before God. As a result of the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham is called "the friend of God" (James 2:23). No longer was Abraham just a child of God (Gen. 15:6); now he was His friend.

Faith and Works Like Oil and Water

It has already been established that faith does not cause works.³ So, what does it mean when James said, "You see that faith was working with his works" (James 2:22)? The idea here is that Abraham's works were cooperating with his faith. Obviously faith and

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works have a relationship. Faith is trust in revealed evidence. Works are behavioral actions resulting from choices, which are based on faith and motivated by desire and need. Remember, faith is the basis of works, but never the cause of works.

Abraham's faith collaborated with his action of offering up Isaac, which is addressed in Hebrews 11:17-19. The author says, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac...He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead." His faith in God's faithfulness was the basis of a willful choice to offer his son as a sacrifice. Using this incident to support his argument, James states that faith is to cooperate with works.

We too are to experience the partnership of faith and works in our lives. Relying on the gracious work of Christ, the believer should

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choose from a grateful heart to obey God's Word. An apathetic believer is, in fact, a contradiction. James appealed to believers when he wrote, "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless [worthless]?" (James 2:20). No wonder James gave Abraham as the illustration of justification not just by faith but also by works.

James wrote, "as a result of [Abraham's] works, faith was perfected" (James 2:22). From faith to faith...to faith...to faith is the basis for work after work, and so forth. Works in turn reinforces the believer's faith. They have a spiral effect in our spiritual growth, progressing from faith to works to faith again and producing spiritual maturity.

Justification Trifocals

The topic of justification can be approached in three ways. James 2:21-24 and Romans 4:2-3 are interpreted in a different way in each case. We have already discussed James 2 regarding Abraham being justified by works in faith-to-faith life experiences. In Romans 4:2 Paul declared, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." Paul's argument beginning in 3:21 is that justification is by faith alone and not by works of the Law (3:28). The works noted in this passage are the works of Ephesians 2:9, works to earn favor with God in order to obtain eternal life. Paul declared that a right standing before God is imparted by faith alone. To affirm this point, Paul quoted Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited [counted] to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). So both James and Paul in the texts under consideration looked to Abraham to illustrate and support of their lines of reasoning. Both point to Abraham's initial justification by faith in Genesis 15:6. However, the works, which Paul focused on, and the works, which James dealt with, are different. Paul's concern was for works preceding initial salvation and justification by faith (Eph. 2:9), while James's concern had to

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do with works subsequent to saving faith—present salvation and justification by works (cf. Eph. 2:10).⁴ Paul concentrated on initial salvation, while James’s thought was directed at present salvation or deliverance in daily life. This distinction seems clear. Why then are there three approaches to justification and what are they?

First, during the sixteenth-century upheaval in religious thinking, the major battle centered on the method of justification. Using the book of James to support their line of reasoning, the Roman Church appealed to James 2:24 that says, “You see that a man is justified

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by works and not by faith alone.”⁵ Interpreting Romans 4 by James 2, the Roman Church insisted that the Scriptures addressed only a single justification, involving two parts: (1) faith and (2) works. As a result, the *faith + works = justification* equation explains a view of justification which merged faith and works.

Second, the Reformers interpreted James 2 by Romans 4, indicating that there are in fact two kinds of justification: (1) justification by faith, as found in Romans 4 and (2) justification by works, from James 2.⁶ At first, the two seem to be

separate concepts, but this is not so. Justification by faith at salvation brings a righteous standing before God; justification by works concerns works that are the necessary and the inevitable product of saving faith. As a result, *saving faith = justification by faith + justification by works*. This view requires that works be evidenced in a person’s life in order to prove that justification by faith or saving faith has actually taken place.

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The distinction between the Roman Church and Reformed views relates primarily to the definitions of faith held by each.⁷ Review the following equations below in the chart *Justification Formulas*. It is difficult to distinguish between the stance of the Church of Rome and the position of the Reformers. R. C. Sproul writes, “In the Roman formula works are a necessary precondition *for* justification. In the Reformed view works are a necessary fruit *of* justification.”⁸

While the Roman view teaches that justification is by faith, but *not by faith alone*, the Reformed view teaches that justification is by faith, but *not by a faith that is alone*. The difference is only in how the pieces are arranged. Both views essentially teach the same doctrine. Both justification by faith and justification by works are required in order to be saved.

JUSTIFICATION FORMULAS (Basic Concept)	
View	Formula
Roman	Faith + Works = Justification
Reformed	Faith = Justification + Works
Free Grace	Faith = Justification

Third, in a totally grace-based view, there are two separate justifications. They are not merged but are distinct and complement one another. In effect, justification by faith can and does take place apart from justification by works. An appeal to James 2, likewise, provides support. More than thirty years had elapsed since Abraham was originally justified (Gen. 15) and the incident with Isaac

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in Genesis 22 occurred. Was Abraham a model of a perfect believer during those thirty years? No! Remember his lies during the trip to Egypt (Gen. 20:1-2), and then a plan to provide for his own heir (Gen. 16:1-3). Was he justified by works at those instances? No! And yet works in Genesis 22 justified him. Why? Because time

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plus growth in his walk with God resulted in maturity. The moment of Isaac's sacrifice was the defining point, a crowning capstone in his walk with God. Abraham was justified by works and proved to be a friend of God. When the believer's

life is consistent with his new position in Christ, he can be justified by his works. This is James's appeal. Faith is useless to the believer if it is not accompanied by works, which lead to maturity.

A review of the chart *Justification Formulas* indicates that in this view no works are required to accompany justification. The *Free Grace view* teaches that *justification by is by faith alone, really alone*. Even though justification by works should be evidenced in a believer's maturing walk, works are never held out as proof of one's justification by faith. Saving faith is just that, saving faith minus any works.

The following chart *Justification Viewed Three Ways* depicts these three positions. Both the Roman Church and Reformed position on salvation call for faith and works. The Free Grace view does not comingle the two, but regards justification by faith the only necessary criteria for initial salvation, while justification by works reveals the believer's maturity in Christ.

Saved and Justified?

The discussion in my classroom resulted in the conclusion that an individual is saved by grace and justified by faith at initial salvation.

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View	Justification
Roman	Single Justification: (A) Faith + (B) Works [Works-righteousness required for final salvation]
Reformed	(1) Justification by Faith & (2) Justification by Works [Works-righteousness required for initial salvation]
Free Grace	(1) Justification by Faith & (2) Justification by Works [Works-righteousness reveals maturity of believer]

Once saved you possess eternal life and have it forever—hence it is eternal. Justification by works has nothing to do with obtaining, keeping, or proving one’s initial salvation. Justification by works concerns the believer’s maturing walk.

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Myth 11, NOTES

1. Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), p. 298.
2. See *Myth 1: It's Always about Heaven or Hell*.
3. See *Myth 2: Faith Is Active*.
4. See *Myth 1: It's Always about Heaven or Hell*, which provides insight to the different types of salvation.
5. R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 69.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
7. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle of the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), pp. 580-581.
8. R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 156 (*italics his*).