

The Friend of God

Faith & Love Part 06
James 2:20-24 5-3-2015

Summary: God considered Abraham His friend, and we can attain that status if we are Abraham’s offspring. All who have true, saving faith are his offspring, as he is the prime example of saving faith. Two components of friendship are trust and peace (looking away from sin). Abraham had that kind of peace with God on the basis of faith, and we, as his children, can as well through faith.

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James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? **15** Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. **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? **17** In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. **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. **19** You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. **20** You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? **21** Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? **22** You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. **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. **24** You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. **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? **26** As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Abraham: the Friend of God

Let me ask you a question that would have been really easy for you to answer when you were in third grade, but might be a little harder now. The question is this: Who is your best friend? Apart from

your spouse or family, who would you say is your closest friend? Whichever people are coming to your mind right now – what are the criteria you are using to determine how close of a friend they are?

“I consider this friendship a close one because of ____.”

There are other people that you consider friends, but if someone asks you, “Is that your best friend?” you would say, “Oh no - we’re not *that* close.” Why? What is different about your relationship with them? What are the components that constitute friendship?

Now, can you imagine those components being applied in the relationship between a certain person and God? Take a look at the end of verse 23.

James 2:23 Abraham ... was called God’s friend.

Isaiah 41:8 But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend...

2 Chronicles 20:7 O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land ... and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?

That’s quite the credential, isn’t it? A lot of people have a lot of impressive credentials, but this one is hard to beat. If you and I were having a conversation about the most famous celebrity alive today and I told you that I consider that person my friend - that would be one thing. But what if that celebrity came on TV and said, “I consider Darrell Ferguson my friend”? I actually don’t care much about secular celebrities, but I can think of a few pastors and theologians that, if they came out publicly and said, “I consider Darrell Ferguson a close, personal friend,” I would probably get puffed up with pride. It would be one thing if Abraham said, “I consider God my friend.” But it is the other way around – God is the one saying, “I consider Abraham My friend.”

So back to the components of friendship – what constitutes a close friendship? With those in mind, if someone walked up to God in heaven right now and asked Him if He considered you to be His personal friend, based on those criteria, what do you think he would say? Do you think He would say, “I love him/her as one of the millions of subjects in My kingdom, but no, I don’t think of him as a personal friend”? Or do you think He would put you right in that same category with Abraham and call you His friend?

Our Father

One of the most astonishing truths of the gospel is that it is actually possible for a regular person like you or me to attain to that level that Abraham attained where God actually calls you His friend.

James 2:21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous...

Why does James call Abraham our **ancestor** (lit. **father**)? Most of us are Gentiles. It would be great if we could somehow be descendants of Abraham because they are the ones God promised to bless with salvation. They are the ones who get all the wonderful things God promised. So it would be fantastic if I could somehow be shown to be in the line of Abraham. But as far as I know, I don’t have a drop of Abrahamic (Semitic) blood in me. So how does James call me a descendent of Abraham? The answer is in Romans 4.

Romans 4:11 [Abraham] is the father of all who believe¹

Abraham set the example of having true, saving faith in God – before there was even such a thing as Jewishness, so everyone, Jew or Gentile, who follows in his footsteps of faith is considered a child of Abraham. You and I are not children of Moses (the giver of the law), but children of Abraham (the model of faith). And as his offspring, we can actually obtain that same friendship status that Abraham had with God.

¹ See also Romans 4:16, 9:8.

Share Your Heart/Life

I'll give you one example. When I asked you to think about the components of friendship – one of those components is the sharing of life together, right? The closer a friendship is, the more you share your lives and hearts with each other. If you have a big decision to make, you'll talk it over with your closest friends. If an important event happens in your life, you'll tell your friends about it. That is how God was with Abraham. In Genesis 18, God was planning on destroying the city of Sodom. But before He did it, He said this:

Genesis 18:17 Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?

God says, "I'm about to do something big. Abraham is my friend – I'll talk it over with him first." It actually turns into quite a discussion between God and Abraham. Abraham makes some requests before God moved ahead, and God agreed to them. That is what you do with a friend – you share what's on your heart with them.

"Could I ever have that kind of relationship with God?"

John 15:15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

There is Jesus affirming that one of the components of friendship is sharing your thoughts with the other person, and by that criteria, He considers us His friends. He shares His thoughts and His heart and His plans with us. He reveals all of that to us through His Word. Unbelievers can read the Bible, but they don't have the Holy Spirit opening their eyes to see the heart of God in His Word like we do.

And as an aside – if God does that for us, shouldn't we do the same back to Him? If He shares His heart with us, shouldn't we pour out our hearts to Him? When you pray, it is fine to ask God for things. But we don't want to get to where that's all there is to our prayers. Pour out your heart to Him – like you would with a really good friend.

Anyway, all that to say that one aspect of friendship is sharing your thoughts with each other. But there are other aspects, and James is going to point out several of them in this passage. My goal in this sermon is two-fold. The primary goal is for you to walk away encouraged, because you are reminded of something that we so easily forget – if you are a believer, God considers you a friend. That is the main goal. The secondary goal is for us to get excited about working on that friendship, so that we can enjoy it more thoroughly. But before we get into those let me just refresh your memory a little bit from last week, since we left off right in the middle of this passage.

Review

Last time we studied verses 14-19, which are all about dead faith – the kind of faith that can't save. The first example was a claim of faith – a profession of faith that is devoid of love for God's people. And the second example was the kind of belief in doctrine that is devoid of trust in and love for God. There are a lot of people who will miss heaven by 18 inches. All the knowledge they need is there in their head, but it doesn't make it down to their heart. And those people are lost.

The first example is easy to accept. Obviously, if someone is freezing cold and starving, and you have the means to help them, but all you do is wish them well and then send them away without helping, everyone can see that that's worthless. But that second one is not as obvious. Many Christians hear that one and say, "Wait a minute. How could someone genuinely believe all the facts of the gospel, believe Jesus died for their sins, but still not be saved? I thought salvation came through faith alone?" The answer is, salvation does come through faith alone, but there is more to faith than just agreeing with the facts. True faith is believing the facts and trusting the person. If you believe all the facts but you don't have a personal, trusting, loving relationship with God, it is not saving faith. And that's really easy to prove because all you have to do is look at the demons. They have impeccable theology, they know the Bible

way better than I do, and yet they are not saved. Why? Because all that knowledge they have, instead of bringing them to a relationship of trusting and loving God, just causes them to bristle against God. That is what that word **shudder** means.

And churches are jammed full of people who are just like that. They are fully convinced that everything in the Bible is true, but they do not trust God. Their confidence is in their own knowledge of doctrine, not in God.

All of that was last week. If your faith does not result in loving God's people – it is dead. If your faith does not result in loving and trusting God – it is dead. Those are the two examples of dead faith. Now, starting in verse 20, James is going to give us two examples of saving faith.

Faith Without Works Is Workless

20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

The word **useless** is just the negative form of the word **deeds**. Lit: **do you want evidence that faith without deeds is deedless?** That is why he calls them fools. Are you so foolish that I have to sit here and prove to you that faith without works doesn't work? Is it that hard to understand that faith that does not do anything, does not do anything?

The answer is, evidently, yes, he does have to prove that. And so to prove it, he points us to Abraham.

21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 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. 24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

In that paragraph, James points us to three more components of friendship. And the first one is trust. The whole paragraph is all about how Abraham trusted God.

Friends Trust Each Other

Friends trust each other. Enemies don't. When you really dislike someone, or you are angry with someone, you will find that the default reaction of your heart is to withhold trust. Everything they do or say, no matter what it is, you suspect. And your natural assumptions are that they must have a bad motive. But when it's someone you love, even when things look bad, your natural assumption is, "Things must not be as they seem." And if they say, "It's not what it looks like," your first impulse is to believe that. Trust is a function of love. There are so many times in marriage counseling where a wife might say, "I just can't trust him anymore." And when you dig a little deeper you find that it is more than just an objective assessment of his trustworthiness. It's anger. He violated her trust, but now he is trying to change, but she refuses to see it because her angry heart refuses to trust again. So it doesn't really matter what he does – she will not trust again. Alexander Maclaren said: "Mutual confidence ... is the very life-blood of friendship. You cannot say, 'A.B. is my friend, but I do not trust him.' If suspicion creeps in, like the foul malaria of tropical swamps, it kills all friendship. Therefore 'he was called the Friend of God' is by James deduced from the fact that 'he believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness.'"

The Test of Trust

So how does all that apply to friendship with God? The stronger your friendship, the stronger your trust. The weaker your friendship, the weaker your trust. If a person does not have strong affection for God, and deep, profound delight in God; when a person doesn't have very many experiences of enjoyment of God's presence, that person will tend to have a lot of suspicion in his heart when God tells him things that don't seem right to him. There are some people who, every time they read the Bible, the

primary response in their heart is always suspicion. Is this really true? I don't know if I can believe that. What about this and this and this...? If they have a broken relationship, and God's Word gives instruction on how to deal with it, but that is the opposite of what they think would be the best way to handle it, they are reluctant. You tell them, "Here's what the Bible says," and they come back with, "Yeah, but..." followed by a bunch of human wisdom. That is not a sign of someone who is a friend of God.

Isaac

If you want to know what friendship with God looks like, take a look at Abraham. Here's what happened: God comes to this elderly couple and promises they're going to have a child. Both were way past childbearing years, and even when Sarah was younger, she was infertile. And God promises that they are going to have a baby, and immediately Abraham claims to believe that promise.

The test of that claim came a few decades later. They eventually did have a son – named him Isaac. And God made some grandiose promises about Isaac. Not only did God promise that through Isaac Abraham would have grandchildren and great-grandchildren as numerous as the stars in the sky, but it was through that line that God would end up bringing redemption and salvation to the world. So it is very, very important that nothing happens to Isaac. Abraham probably made him wear a helmet all day every day just to be safe.

Well, Isaac survives his childhood, and when he was a young man, God decided it was time to test Abraham's faith.

Genesis 22:1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

That is some test. You think God tested your faith in severe ways – how would you like this test? Take your only son, tie them up, put a knife through his heart, get a fire going, and then offer his body as a sacrifice. Stop for a moment and imagine if God required that of you.

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey.

He gets up early in the morning. If there were ever a day you would be tempted to sleep in, this would be the day. But one thing about Abraham's faith – there was no hesitation to it. How could he do that? His friendship with God was so close, that he knew he could trust God no matter how bad it looked.

Romans 4:19 Without weakening in his faith ...20 he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

When God told him to do this, he did not even have to think it over. He did not deliberate, he did not take time to weigh the consequences - first thing in the morning, early, he is on his way up the mountain. It ended up being about a three-day journey. This test that God gave Abraham was not over in an hour. Every single step along that journey, you know that Satan was doing everything he could possibly think of to get Abraham to turn around.

4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

Why did he say, "we," will come back? Was he thinking that God might call the whole thing off? No – he was not thinking that. Abraham had every intention of plunging that knife into his son. The reason he told them that they would both come back is revealed in Hebrews 11:19.

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son ... 19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead

There had never been a resurrection before, but that was the only way Abraham could figure God could fulfill His promise. It didn't enter his mind that maybe God would renege on His promise.

Genesis 22:9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.

Isaac is looking around. Their way up here on the mountain, in the middle of nowhere – still no lamb. And at that moment Abraham says, “Come here.”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Turn around. Let me have your hands.”

“Dad, what are you doing? Why are you tying me up? Why are you putting me up on the altar, on top of the wood? Dad, what are you doing?”

“God has required this of us. He told me to sacrifice you on this altar. We have to do this, Son.”

I don't know if there was a discussion, or a struggle, or just a “Yes sir,” but somehow or another Isaac ends up bound and on the altar.

10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

Abraham had done this many times with animals – he knew how to make it quick.

11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

12 “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Can you imagine that moment? Sometimes when you think things are one way and they suddenly change, it takes a moment for your emotions to adjust. Finally Abraham unties Isaac and I am thinking at that moment they have one of the longest hugs they have ever had.

If you are sitting there thinking, “I don't know if I could do that” – if you don't think you could trust God that much, my advice – work on your friendship. Instead of just saying, “I need to just be more obedient!” learn to enjoy God more, so your heart will be more inclined to trust Him.

God Trusts...Himself

When I first started on this point I mentioned that friendship is marked by mutual trust. You need to trust God, but does God trust you? Did God trust Abraham? I don't have time to go into this in detail, but if you read about God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, you will find something very interesting. The normal procedure was to cut the sacrificial animals in half and put them in two lines with a path in the middle. Then the two parties of the covenant would walk through, which was like saying, “If I break this covenant, may what happened to these animals also happen to me.” So God had Abraham cut the animals and arrange them in the two lines, then God put Abraham to sleep and God walked that path alone. The point of that was that God was going to fulfill the covenant on both sides.

In our friendship with God, on our end – we trust God. And on His end, God trusts...Himself. He trusts Himself to work through you to fulfill your end.

Think of a mother of a two-year-old. On the kid's birthday, she makes him a cake. On her birthday, he wants to make her a cake, which just means double the work for her. She has to not only make the cake, but try to figure out ways he can “help.”

But when we do that as parents, it's really a game of pretend. They aren't really doing much. I remember one time when the kids were little they wanted to make a cake for Tracy on her birthday. So we told her to sleep in and the kids and I started working on the cake. Josiah was probably one or two, and

the only thing I could think of that he was capable of doing to help was to dump the mix into the big bowl. So I set the bowl on the counter, handed him the box held them up above the bowl and said, “Okay, dump it in.” He completely missed the bowl and about 90% of it went on the floor. So we swept up the mix and put it in the bowl. I let Nikki crack the eggs - I think we were able to pick most of the shell pieces out of there. Then it was Faith’s turn. Just stick the electric mixer in and press the button. She did, and she wanted to see what she was doing, so she took a closer look - a little too close. That mixer caught her beautiful long hair instantly, wrapped it all in there in a giant tangle and smacked against her head. Chocolate cake batter was all over the wall, the floor, the ceiling – everywhere. Faith was crying, I was trying to get that thing untangled from her hair, Josiah just kept saying, “Dad, I think we need to get Mom. We need to get Mom!” We did finally get that thing in the oven, but I think we had more leftovers than normal. That is kind of how it is when we let our children “help.” But with God it isn’t like that. He actually works through us to create good things!

1 Timothy 1:12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.

I’m not faithful, and God comes along and considers me faithful, and that considering actually changes me and makes me faithful.

Friends Are at Peace with Each Other

So one aspect of friendship that James brings out is trust. The second one that he points out is peace and reconciliation. In a close friendship, friends don’t remain at odds with each other. If there is a conflict, they work it out and restore peace between them. They don’t focus on each others sins or failures. When you really love someone, you turn your eyes away from their sins and your focus is on the good things. When you really dislike someone, it is just the opposite. All you see is their sins and weaknesses and failures, and those things define that person in your thinking.

Abraham’s Justification

Starting in verse 21, James walks us through how God did that with Abraham.

21 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous...

The word translated **considered righteous** is the word **justified**. To be justified means to be declared right with God. God justified Abraham by declaring, “This man is on good terms with Me.” Have you ever asked someone if they are still upset with you and they say, “No, we’re good”? To be justified means God points to you and says, “We’re good.”

That is the only way to get friendship status with God. God has to decide to look past all of your sin, all of your disobedience, all your failures and declare you to be right with Him. That is what He did with Abraham. God decided to overlook all of Abraham’s countless thousands of sins throughout his lifetime and declare him to be on good terms with God. On what basis did God do that? God doesn’t do that for everyone – He did it for Abraham, why? The answer to that question appears numerous times in Scripture, and it is always the same.

Genesis 15

One of the most important verses in the whole Bible is Genesis 15:6. In the first part of Genesis 15 God makes some promises to Abraham about how he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and then...

Genesis 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Was everything in Abraham's character righteous? No. Was Abraham perfectly clean and without sin? No.

<p>Genesis 15</p> <p>Promise of Countless Offspring</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness"</p>

Imputation

Notice the word **credited**.

Genesis 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

It doesn't say that Abraham was righteous – it just says that he got credit for being righteous. Because of Abraham's faith God was willing to give him credit for being righteous even though he was not righteous. God looked at his faith and credited that faith to Abraham's account as if it were righteousness. God counted Abraham's faith as if it were a perfect life. When you read about the righteous in the Old Testament, it is not talking about perfect people. It is talking about people who have faith like Abraham's faith. Those people still sin, but God credits righteousness to their account just because of their faith.

That is how salvation worked back then, and that is how it still works today.²

Colossians 1:21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith

Just like Abraham, we can have a fully reconciled relationship with God and peace with God, completely on the basis of faith.

The Problem

So Abraham is called the father of all who believe. Whenever a New Testament writer needs an example of saving faith, they always point to Abraham in Genesis 15:6. It happens here in James 2, it happens in Hebrews 11, in Galatians 3, in Romans 4. The entire chapter of Romans 4 is a discussion of Genesis 15:6. Abraham is always the prime example of saving faith. But there is a problem. When James points us to Abraham, instead of saying Abraham was justified by faith, he says Abraham was justified by works. He says that in verse 21 and again down in verse 24.

24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

That is one twist. The other one is that instead of citing Genesis 15, James cites Genesis 22.

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

The incident with Isaac happened in Genesis 22, which was something like 30 years after Genesis 15.³

If Abraham was justified by faith, why does James say it was by works? And if it happened in Genesis 15, why does James point us to Genesis 22? Is James denying that Abraham was justified by faith back in Genesis 15? No, he mentions that down in verse 23.

<p>Genesis 15</p> <p>Promise of Countless Offspring</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness"</p>	← 30 years →	<p>Genesis 22</p> <p>Sacrifice of Isaac</p>
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² Sometimes people think that salvation was different in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. They think that now we are saved by grace but back then people were somehow saved without grace. That is dead wrong. The way people are saved today is exactly the same as the way Abraham was saved - they hear the truth about God, they placed their trust in Him, and when God sees that trust he gives them credit for being righteous even though they are not righteous.

³ We don't have the exact dates. Most likely it was somewhere between 25 and 40 years later.

23 Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness

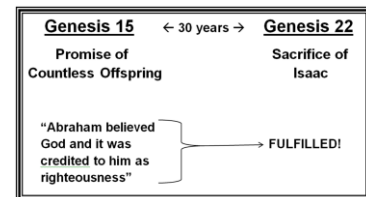
That is a quotation of Genesis 15:6. So it's not like James thinks that Abraham first became a believer in Genesis 22. He knows that happened back in chapter 15. The thing that James wants us to understand is the relationship between what happened in chapter 15 and what happened in chapter 22. And the key to understanding that is in the word **fulfilled** in verse 23.

The Fulfillment of Faith

James 2:21 Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness"

That is an interesting choice of words because normally you expect to see the word *fulfilled* used in connection with prophecy, or some kind of prediction. But there is no explicit prophecy or prediction in Genesis 15:6 - it just says **Abraham believed God**. But you see, that is exactly the point that James is making here.

Any time you see a reference to genuine, saving faith – that is a prophecy. It is a prophecy about some results that are going to come from that faith. Anytime God makes a promise and you say, "I believe You, God," you are making a prophecy. You are predicting that there are going to be some actions in your life that will result from this faith that you claim to have. If someone points to a tree and says, "That is an apple tree," that person is making a prophecy that apples are going to appear on the branches. And if someone points to a heart and says, "There is faith in that heart," that person is making a prophecy that spiritual fruit is going to appear in that person's life. And so the point that James is making is that when Abraham believed in Genesis 15, if that faith is real, there is going to be a chapter 22. When you believe, from that moment on, that faith compels action. So the works are the fulfillment of the faith, because faith has a purpose.



The Purpose of Faith

22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

The term translated **made complete** means to fulfill the purpose or goal. Faith has a purpose. When God grants faith in someone's heart, He has a purpose in mind. And that purpose is more than just getting you to heaven. If you were to have faith and the only result is your sins are all forgiven and you go to heaven – that would be incomplete. So what is that purpose that God wants to see accomplished by our faith?

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance so that we should walk in them.

We are His workmanship. If you think of a composer creating a symphony, or an artist creating a sculpture or painting, or a carpenter creating a piece of furniture – that is what God is doing right now with you. He is crafting you and sculpting you into something. What for? If someone creates a piece of furniture, we know what that's for. If someone builds a house, we know what that's for. If someone writes a piece of music, we know what that's for. God is forming you into something – for what purpose? What does He want to use you for? What is the purpose of all this hammering and chiseling that He's doing?

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...

God wants to accomplish a bunch of specific good works, and He is forming you into a tool that He wants to use to get them done. And it really is a very specific list.

Ephesians 2:10 ... created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance so that we should walk in them.

That is the purpose of your faith. This is another reason why we have to reject that doctrine that says a person can be saved by praying a prayer even if he doesn't become a follower of Christ in the way he lives. Those people who teach that, believe that there are two classes of Christians – the fruit-bearing kind, and the non-fruit-bearing kind. But that theory runs aground on Ephesians 2:10. If the whole point of faith is to bring about a good works – why would God give some people some cheesy, scaled-back version of faith that doesn't include good works?

When a farmer put the seed into the ground, he doesn't do it for fun. He does it because he wants a harvest. When God puts faith in your heart, He doesn't do that just for fun. He does it because he wants a harvest of good works.

Martin Luther, in his preface to the book of Romans described faith this way: "Faith ... is a divine work in us which changes us and ...brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, it is a living, busy, active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them." That's true, and if you ever doubt that, just read through Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 is known as the Hall of Faith – all the great examples of faith throughout the Old Testament. But it could just as well be called the Hall of Works, because every single example is something that the person did – actions that resulted from their trust in God.

The Work: Loving/Trusting God

Okay, so James has drilled it into our heads that true faith always produces works. But what kind of works? He started out back in verse 16 with the example of helping someone in need – giving food and clothing to someone who didn't have them. That makes sense. But what kind of works did Abraham's faith cause him to do? Try to kill his son? If James is concerned about works of love coming from our faith, why does he pick an illustration of a man whose faith drove him to plunge a knife into his son's heart?

It is because before there can be any real, Christian love toward people, there must first be love for God. Giving assistance to the poor is absolutely meaningless unless you do it because you are a friend of God. And the same goes for every single good work out there. The first test of faith is not, "Are you out there helping the poor?" The first test is, "Are you a friend of God?" And what kind of actions prove that you're a friend of God? Putting Isaac on the altar. Listen to what God said when He first told him to sacrifice Isaac.

Genesis 22:1 Some time later God tested Abraham. ...2 "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering

Why does God give those descriptions of Isaac - **your only son ... whom you love**? How many sons named Isaac did Abraham have? The reason God says that is for our benefit – so we understand that from an earthly standpoint Abraham's whole world was bound up in Isaac. He dearly loved Isaac, and all of his hope for the future rested in Isaac. God points to the most precious gift He had ever given Abraham and says, "I want to know what will happen if I tell you to let go of that."

What is your Isaac? What is the most precious gift God has given you in this life? What would happen if it came down to a choice – either obey God or hang on to that gift?

"I hope I never have to make that choice."

You have to make that choice every single day. Not like Abraham – God isn't going to ask you to plunge a knife into the heart of your dearest loved one. But every single day you are faced with the choice – do I derive my hope and joy and comfort and security from these gifts God has given me? Or do I go to God every day for all those things?

Your dearest loved one will let you down. Your giant retirement account could evaporate overnight. The day will come when you are brokenhearted and you sit down to play your video games, and they

won't be able to comfort you. God has given us some wonderful gifts in this life, but they are all just samples of what His presence is like. And the appetites of your soul are too big to live on samples. Let those samples do their job and point you to God himself. Devote your life to seeking deeper and deeper friendship with Him. And deepening your friendship with God isn't complicated. All you have to do is trust Him.

Benediction: Romans 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. On a scale from 1-10, how would you rate your level of certainty that you are a friend of God?
2. What differences do you think there might be in your life if you had more conscious awareness of the fact that God considers you His friend?
3. What are some "Isaacs" in your life that would be the greatest test of your faith if God asked you to give them up?

Appendix: “Now I Know”

After Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac on the altar, God made a statement that has troubled a lot of people.

Genesis 22:12 ... Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Now I know? Did God not know that before? There is a heresy known as Open Theism that teaches God really didn't know. The open theists say God doesn't know the future – prophecy is nothing but educated guesses. Those people point to a verse like that and say, “See, God didn't know for sure if Abraham's faith was real.”

The problem with that is, what are you going to do with chapter 15? Way back when God first made the promise in chapter 15 it says that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. How could God have credited Abraham's faith to him as righteousness if He didn't know for sure if that faith was real? Hebrews 11 says that it was because of Abraham's faith that Isaac was even born. God knew that Abraham's faith was real the split-second that faith appeared in Abraham's heart. This section of James speaks of the 2 kinds of faith – the kind can save and the dead kind that cannot save. God doesn't have any problem spotting saving faith and dead faith.

John 2:23 Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. 24 But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. 25 He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.

Those people had dead faith, and Jesus knew it immediately. Throughout His ministry Jesus was constantly reading people's thoughts.

Act 1:24 Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart.

Hebrews 4:13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

God does not have to conduct tests to discover what is in people's hearts. However, He does conduct tests. Why? If He already knows the outcome, why does God test us? And why did He say, “**now I know that you fear God**”? If He already knew, why would He say that?

The answer is, there are different kinds of knowing. There is informational knowing, where you are aware of facts. But very often the word, “to know,” in Scripture goes beyond awareness of facts and refers to an experiential knowledge. We sometimes talk that way – we might say something like, “I have never known real poverty before.” What does that mean? I didn't know what the word poverty meant? No, it means I never experienced it. I had lots of knowledge about it, but not experiential knowledge.

When God said **now I know that you fear God**, I believe what that means is that this fact that God knew to be true already, was finally played out in reality. God tests our faith because He likes seeing faith in action. That's why whenever Jesus saw faith in someone's heart, He would always put a test in front of them so that their faith would be exposed.