

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: The Friend of God: Faith Made Complete by Obedience

James 2:21–24; Romans 4:1–5, 16–22; Hebrews 11:8–19

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the most doctrinally weighty lesson in the study, and the teacher should approach it with both confidence and clarity. Here the New Testament itself uses Abraham to teach the relationship between faith and works, and the lesson stands directly on top of the doctrinal error this study rejects: salvation by faith only. The three passages work together. James 2:21–24 declares that Abraham was justified by works and not by faith alone, and that his faith was completed by his works. Romans 4:1–5, 16–22 declares that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works, with righteousness credited as a gift rather than earned as a wage. Hebrews 11:8–19 shows that Abraham's faith was always an obedient, acting faith: by faith he obeyed and went, sojourned, and offered Isaac. The teacher's task is to show that these are not in conflict but in perfect harmony.

The key is to see that Paul and James are answering two different errors and using the word 'works' in two different senses. Paul excludes works of merit and law-keeping by which a person would earn salvation and have grounds to boast, putting God in his debt; against that, justification is by grace through faith, a gift. James excludes a dead, workless faith that claims to believe but never obeys, no better than the belief of demons who believe and shudder (James 2:19); against that, the only faith that justifies is a living faith that obeys. Put them together and you have the consistent teaching of Scripture and of this study: justification by grace through a living, obedient faith. Not earned by works of merit, and not a bare faith that stands alone. James 2:24 is the only place in Scripture the phrase 'faith alone' occurs, and there it is explicitly denied; the teacher should make this plain and not soften it.

The doctrinal climax (Question 9) ties this to the gospel and the plan of salvation. The faith that saves is the obedient faith for which Abraham is called the friend of God: a faith that hears the gospel, believes in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repents of sin, confesses Him, is baptized into Him, and lives faithfully (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16; Hebrews 5:9). This is not salvation earned by works, and it is not salvation by faith only; it is salvation by grace, received through an obedient faith. Teach it warmly and confidently, guarding against both legalism and the doctrine of faith only, and lead students to examine whether their own faith is the living, obedient kind that makes one a friend of God.

Question 1

Student Question:

James writes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works” (James 2:21–22). What does it mean that Abraham’s faith was “active along with” and “completed by” his works, and how does this describe the true relationship between genuine faith and obedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center on James’s two phrases, because they define the whole relationship. ‘Faith was active along with his works’ means faith and obedience operated together, side by side; they were not two separate things but one living reality. Abraham’s believing and his obeying were inseparable; the faith worked, and the works flowed from faith.

Then explain ‘completed by his works.’ The word means brought to its goal, matured, perfected, shown to be what it truly is. Abraham’s faith, first credited as righteousness in Genesis 15, reached its full expression and proof decades later on Moriah. Works did not replace his faith or add a separate ingredient; they completed it, the way fruit completes a healthy tree without being a different thing from the tree’s life.

Draw the relationship clearly. Genuine faith and obedience are not opposed, and they are not even two stages joined by a bridge; obedience is what living faith does. A faith that never acts is not yet faith in the biblical sense at all. As the body without the spirit is dead, James says, so faith without works is dead (James 2:26). The works are the breath that proves the faith is alive.

Apply it pastorally. This means we test the reality of our faith not by the sincerity of our feelings or the orthodoxy of our beliefs alone, but by whether our faith actually moves us to obey God. A faith that costs nothing and changes nothing is not the faith of Abraham.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith and works operating together as one living reality
- ‘Completed’ as brought to its goal, matured, and proven
- Obedience as what living faith does, not a separate ingredient
- Faith without works is dead (James 2:26)
- Testing the reality of faith by whether it moves us to obey

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that faith was ‘active along with’ Abraham’s works?
- How can works ‘complete’ faith without being a separate thing added to it?
- How does this passage help us test whether our faith is alive?

Question 2

Student Question:

James insists that real faith is a living, working faith. Examine your own: is it mostly a set of beliefs you affirm, or a living trust that actually moves you to obey? In what specific area does your faith most need to stop being merely something you believe and start being something you do?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Turn the doctrine into a mirror. It is possible to hold entirely correct beliefs about God and salvation while living largely unchanged by them. James will not allow that to pass as saving faith. Help the class honestly ask whether their faith is mostly cognitive, affirming truths, or genuinely active, reshaping how they live.

Press for specifics. A general admission that we could obey better changes nothing. Ask each person to name the actual area where their belief and their behavior diverge most: perhaps in forgiveness, generosity, purity, honesty, service, or witness. The point is one concrete place where faith needs to start moving.

Encourage a first step, not a vague resolve. Living faith expresses itself in action, so invite each person to identify one specific act of obedience that would make their faith visible this week. Faith grows by being exercised, just as Abraham's did across a lifetime of obeying.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Correct beliefs that leave life unchanged are not yet saving faith
- Distinguishing cognitive assent from active trust
- Naming the specific gap between belief and behavior
- A concrete act of obedience to make faith visible

Discussion Prompts

- Is your faith mostly something you believe or something you do?
- Where is the gap widest between your belief and your behavior?
- What one act of obedience would make your faith visible this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

James states it as plainly as possible: "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24), the only place in Scripture the phrase "faith alone" appears, and there it is denied. Reading the surrounding context (James 2:14–19), what kind of faith is James condemning, and why does he say a faith that produces no works is dead, no better than the belief of demons?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read the context carefully with the class (James 2:14–19), because it defines the faith James condemns. He describes a man who says he has faith but has no works, who sees a brother in need and offers only words. He asks pointedly, ‘Can that faith save him?’ The faith in question is a bare profession, a claim to believe that produces nothing.

Note the devastating comparison. ‘You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder’ (James 2:19). The demons have impeccable theology; they know God is one, and it makes them tremble. But their belief saves none of them, because it is mere intellectual acknowledgment without submission or obedience. A faith no better than the demons’ is no saving faith at all.

State the significance of James 2:24 plainly, and do not soften it. This is the only occurrence of the phrase ‘faith alone’ in all of Scripture, and the inspired writer places the word ‘not’ in front of it: ‘not by faith alone.’ Whatever else this means, it means the Bible directly denies that we are justified by faith only. The teacher should say this clearly; it is one of the plainest statements in the New Testament on the matter.

Clarify what James is and is not saying, to prepare for the harmony with Paul. James is not teaching that we earn salvation by accumulating good deeds. He is teaching that the faith which justifies is never alone; it is always accompanied by, and completed in, obedient works. A workless faith is a dead faith, and a dead faith justifies no one. This sets up the personal question about the gap between confession and conduct.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The faith James condemns: a bare profession that produces nothing (James 2:14–17)
- The demons’ belief: correct theology without submission (James 2:19)
- James 2:24, the only occurrence of ‘faith alone,’ explicitly denied
- A dead, workless faith justifies no one
- James not teaching earning, but that justifying faith is never alone

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of faith is James condemning in 2:14–19?
- Why is a faith no better than the demons’ unable to save?
- What does it mean that Scripture denies justification by ‘faith alone’?

Question 4

Student Question:

James says even the demons believe, and shudder (James 2:19), yet that belief saves no one. Are there areas where your “faith” looks more like the demons’ belief, affirming truths about God while refusing to obey Him? Where is the gap widest between what you confess and how you actually live?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the comparison to the demons sting a little, gently. It is sobering that one can have flawless beliefs and still have a faith that saves no one. The question forces us to ask whether our Christianity has become mainly a matter of agreeing with true statements while withholding actual obedience.

Help the class locate the gap honestly. Most of us have a specific area where we know what God says, affirm it as true, and yet quietly refuse to obey: a relationship we will not reconcile, a sin we will not surrender, a command we treat as optional. That is the place where our faith most resembles the demons' belief.

Point toward repentance, not despair. The remedy is to close the gap, to let belief become obedience in that specific area. Invite each person to name the widest gap between their confession and their conduct and to take it to God in honest repentance and a step of obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sobering possibility of correct belief without saving obedience
- Locating the specific area where we affirm but refuse to obey
- Faith resembling the demons' belief where obedience is withheld
- Closing the gap through repentance and obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your faith look more like mere agreement than obedience?
- What command do you affirm as true but treat as optional?
- What would closing that gap look like this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul, looking at the same Abraham, insists he was not justified by works, that he had nothing to boast about, and that to the one who works the wage is counted as a debt, but to the one who trusts God, faith is counted as righteousness (Romans 4:1–5). What error is Paul excluding, and why does the gospel leave no room for earning our salvation or putting God in our debt?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Establish Paul's target. In Romans and Galatians, Paul confronts those who would make salvation a matter of earning, especially through works of the law and accumulated merit, as though a person could place God in his debt and then boast in his own achievement. Against

this, Paul wields Abraham: he was justified by faith, not by works of merit, with nothing to boast about before God.

Unpack the wage-versus-gift logic of Romans 4:4–5. ‘To the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.’ If we could earn salvation, God would owe it to us, and grace would no longer be grace. ‘But to the one who does not work but believes,’ faith is counted as righteousness. Salvation is reckoned as a gift to faith, never as a paycheck for performance.

Show why this matters for the gospel. If salvation could be earned, no one could be sure they had earned enough, and the cross would be unnecessary. Paul guards the freeness of grace: we are accepted on the basis of Christ’s work received by faith, not our own merit. This is the truth Genesis 15:6 taught and Romans 4 expounds.

Be precise so the harmony with James holds. Paul excludes works of merit and law-keeping that would earn salvation and ground boasting. He is not excluding the obedience of faith (indeed Paul calls for ‘the obedience of faith,’ Romans 1:5; 16:26, and says faith works through love, Galatians 5:6). The works Paul rejects are merit-works that put God in our debt, not the obedient response of a living faith. This distinction is the hinge of Question 7.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul’s target: earning salvation by works of merit and law, with boasting
- The wage-versus-gift logic of Romans 4:4–5
- Grace ceases to be grace if salvation can be earned
- Paul still calls for the obedience of faith (Romans 1:5; 16:26; Galatians 5:6)
- Distinguishing merit-works (rejected) from the obedience of faith (required)

Discussion Prompts

- What specific error is Paul excluding in Romans 4?
- Why would grace stop being grace if we could earn salvation?
- What kind of works does Paul reject, and what kind does he still call for?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul says there is no boasting before God. Where are you still tempted to think God owes you because of your record, your religious performance, or your good behavior? How does the truth that righteousness is a gift, not a wage, free you from both pride and fear?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Expose the subtle merit-keeping in the religious heart. Even those who would never say they are earning salvation often live with a quiet ledger, feeling close to God on their good days and

rejected on their bad ones, secretly believing their performance has earned or forfeited His favor. That is boasting and its shadow, fear.

Apply the gift logic to both pride and fear. If righteousness is a gift, then on our best days we have no grounds to boast, because we did not earn our standing; and on our worst days we need not despair, because our standing never rested on our performance. Grace humbles the proud and steadies the fearful at the same time.

Guard against the misuse, since the next questions develop the harmony. Resting in grace is not an excuse to stop obeying; it is the secure foundation from which grateful obedience flows. Invite each person to name where they are keeping a merit-ledger and to trade it for confident rest in God's gift, expressed in joyful obedience rather than anxious earning.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The hidden merit-ledger in the religious heart
- Grace humbling pride and steadying fear at once
- Standing with God grounded in gift, not performance
- Resting in grace as the foundation for grateful obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you act as though God owes you for your performance?
- How does grace free you from both pride and fear?
- How is resting in grace different from using grace as an excuse?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul and James both cite the same verse about Abraham (Genesis 15:6) and reach conclusions that only seem to conflict. How are they actually in harmony, given that Paul excludes works of merit and law-keeping that would earn salvation and allow boasting, while James excludes a dead, workless faith that never obeys? Why is it crucial to see that they use the word "works" in two different senses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

State the apparent problem squarely, then resolve it. Paul says 'justified by faith, not by works' (Romans 3:28; 4:2); James says 'justified by works, and not by faith alone' (James 2:24). To the careless reader these collide. To the careful reader they fit together perfectly, because the two writers are answering opposite errors and using their key words differently.

Clarify the two senses of 'works.' When Paul says we are not justified by works, he means works of merit and law-keeping by which a person would earn salvation and boast, putting God in his

debt. When James says we are justified by works, he means the works of obedient faith, the deeds in which a living faith expresses and completes itself. Paul rejects works as a way to earn; James requires works as the evidence and completion of genuine faith. Same word, two meanings.

Clarify the two errors. Paul fights legalism, the proud attempt to earn salvation. James fights dead orthodoxy, the empty claim to a faith that never obeys. One thief would steal grace by turning it into wages; the other would steal it by turning it into mere words. Both Paul and James guard the same gospel from opposite directions.

Show that Genesis 15:6 unites them. Both quote it. Paul stresses that Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness,' proving justification is by faith, not merit. James notes that this Scripture was 'fulfilled' when Abraham offered Isaac, proving that the faith which was counted righteous was the kind that obeys. The believing of Genesis 15 and the obeying of Genesis 22 are one faith. There is no contradiction, only the full picture: justification by grace through a living, obedient faith.

Drive home why this matters. Misreading either writer produces a false gospel. Pit Paul against James and stress Paul alone, and you get 'faith only,' which James explicitly denies. Stress James alone, and you get works-salvation, which Paul explicitly denies. Held together, they give the one true gospel this study consistently teaches.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul and James answering opposite errors with the same Abraham
- 'Works' in two senses: works of merit (Paul rejects) versus works of obedient faith (James requires)
- Paul against legalism; James against dead orthodoxy
- Genesis 15:6 uniting believing (Genesis 15) and obeying (Genesis 22) as one faith
- Misreading either writer produces a false gospel

Discussion Prompts

- How can Paul say 'not by works' and James say 'by works' without contradiction?
- What two different things do they each mean by 'works'?
- How does Genesis 15:6 hold both writers together?

Question 8

Student Question:

It is possible to drift toward either error: toward legalism (trying to earn God's favor) or toward a careless faith that presumes on grace and never truly obeys. Which way do you tend to lean, and what would it look like to hold grace and obedience together as Abraham did, neither earning nor presuming?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Help each person identify their characteristic ditch. Some are natural legalists, exhausted by trying to earn what is freely given, quick to feel condemned. Others lean toward presumption, comfortable with grace as a cover for half-hearted obedience. Most of us know which way we tilt.

Speak to the legalist: the gospel frees you from the treadmill; your standing is a gift, and you can obey out of gratitude and love rather than fear. Speak to the presumer: grace is not permission; a faith that will not obey is not the faith that saves, and Abraham's example warns you. Each error needs the other's truth.

Point to Abraham as the integrated model. He rested in God's gift of righteousness and he obeyed at the highest cost; grace and obedience were not in tension in him but woven together. Invite each person to name their lean and one concrete way to move toward that wholeness this week, neither earning nor presuming.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two ditches: legalism and presumption
- Grace freeing the legalist; grace as no permission for the presumer
- Abraham as the integrated model of grace and obedience
- Moving toward wholeness: neither earning nor presuming

Discussion Prompts

- Which ditch do you naturally lean toward, legalism or presumption?
- What truth does your particular lean most need to hear?
- What would holding grace and obedience together look like for you?

Question 9

Student Question:

Putting Paul, James, and Hebrews 11 together, Abraham was justified by grace through a living, obedient faith, never by works of merit and never by a faith that merely believed and did nothing, and Hebrews 11 shows that "by faith" Abraham obeyed, went, waited, and offered his son. How does this combined witness give us the clearest possible refutation of salvation by "faith only," and how does it shape our understanding of the gospel, that we are saved by grace through a faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses Christ, is baptized into Him, and lives faithfully (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26–27; Hebrews 5:9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the entire study, so let the class feel its weight. Bring the three witnesses together. Paul: justified by faith, not by works of merit, so no one boasts. James: justified by works and not by faith alone, so no one presumes on a dead faith. Hebrews 11: 'by faith' Abraham obeyed and went, sojourned, and offered Isaac, so that faith is shown to be an obedient, acting trust from beginning to end. Together they give one unified doctrine: justification by grace through a living, obedient faith.

Name the refutation of 'faith only' plainly and confidently. The phrase 'faith alone' occurs exactly once in Scripture, in James 2:24, where it is denied. The combined witness of these passages makes the matter unmistakable: saving faith is never alone. It is always the kind of faith that trusts God and therefore obeys Him. Abraham, the very example the New Testament chooses for this doctrine, proves it. He is the friend of God not because he merely believed correct things but because his faith trusted and obeyed, even unto offering his son. 'And he was called a friend of God' stands in James precisely as the summary of a faith completed by works (James 2:23).

Now connect this to the gospel and the plan of salvation, carefully and warmly. If saving faith is an obedient faith, then the gospel call is a call not to bare belief but to a trust that responds and obeys. The New Testament spells out that response: hearing the gospel (Romans 10:17), believing in Jesus as Lord and Christ (John 8:24), repenting of sin (Acts 17:30), confessing Him (Romans 10:9–10), and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16), followed by faithful living. This is not earning salvation by works of merit; every part of it is the response of faith to God's grace, the way an obedient faith lays hold of the gift God freely offers in Christ.

Guard the balance so the class does not swing to the other error. None of this makes salvation a wage we earn. We bring nothing that puts God in our debt; the merit is all Christ's, and the gift is all grace. Baptism, repentance, and confession are not achievements that earn salvation but the appointed expressions of a faith that trusts and obeys God, exactly as Abraham's departure and his offering of Isaac were expressions, not purchases, of his faith. Grace through an obedient faith is the consistent gospel; faith only on one side and works-salvation on the other are both excluded.

Tie it to Christ, who saves and who befriends. Hebrews 5:9 says Christ 'became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,' and Jesus said, 'You are my friends if you do what I command you' (John 15:14). The faith that made Abraham the friend of God is the same obedient faith that makes us friends of Jesus today. Lead the class to embrace it: not a faith that earns, not a faith that merely believes and does nothing, but a living, trusting, obeying faith that lays hold of grace and follows the Lord.

Close by sending them to self-examination, not mere debate. The aim is not only that they can refute 'faith only' in an argument, but that they examine whether their own faith is the living, obedient kind. The friend of God was known by a faith that obeyed; so are his children.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The combined witness of Paul, James, and Hebrews 11: grace through a living, obedient faith
- 'Faith alone' denied in its only occurrence (James 2:24); saving faith is never alone
- Abraham the friend of God through a faith completed by works (James 2:23)
- The gospel response: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, baptism, faithful living (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16; Romans 10:9–10, 17)
- These responses as expressions of faith, not works of merit that earn salvation
- Christ the source of salvation to all who obey Him (Hebrews 5:9; John 15:14)
- Examining whether our own faith is the living, obedient kind

Discussion Prompts

- How do Paul, James, and Hebrews 11 together refute salvation by faith only?
- Why is the gospel response (faith, repentance, confession, baptism) not earning salvation?
- How is the faith that made Abraham God's friend the same faith that makes us Christ's friends?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this whole study of Abraham, the friend of God. You have seen a faith that trusted God and obeyed Him, stumbled and got back up, and was completed by works of obedience. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through Abraham's example. What is the single truth about saving faith, the harmony of grace and obedience, or friendship with God that you most need to carry into your life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Gather the whole study into a personal response. After eleven lessons walking with Abraham, press the class for one specific, lasting takeaway. Some need to abandon a merit-ledger and rest in grace; some need to stop presuming and start obeying; some need to let a dead area of belief come alive in action; some most need to know they can be a friend of God through a trusting, obedient faith.

Anchor it in Christ. The faith that justified and befriended Abraham finds its object, for us, in Jesus, the promised Seed, the One who obeyed perfectly and gave Himself for us. Being formed by Abraham's example finally means following Christ with the same kind of living, obedient trust, and resting wholly in His grace.

End with assurance and invitation. The God who counted Abraham's faith as righteousness and called him friend offers the same grace and the same friendship to all who come to Him through

Christ in an obedient faith. Encourage the class, and if any have never responded to the gospel in the obedience of faith, gently make clear how they may.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gathering the whole study into one personal response
- Christ as the object of the faith that justifies and befriends
- Following Christ with a living, obedient trust resting in grace
- The offer of grace and friendship with God through an obedient faith in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What single truth from this study do you most need to carry into your life?
- How is Jesus forming you through Abraham's example of obedient faith?
- What would it mean for you to live as a friend of God this week?