

“Faith Apart from Works Is Dead”

Texts: James 2:14-24; Genesis 15:1-21

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James

It would be hard to find a passage of Scripture which is more controversial than James 2:14-26. The reason for the controversy is James’ assertion in verse 24 that “*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” On its face, this seems to fly in the face of a number of passages in Paul’s letters where Paul appears to be saying the exact opposite thing. Take, for example, Galatians 2:16. “*Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*” Those who believe that the justification of sinners is a process which is not complete until death (Rome), view James’ assertion here as a classic proof-text which supports this view. But those who see justification as an instantaneous declaration made about the sinner because the merits of Christ are imputed to them through the means of faith, seem to stumble all over James’ declaration that works are somehow tied to justification, and that we are *not* justified by faith alone. But as we will see, James and Paul do not contradict each other. In fact, when James’ assertion is put in its proper context, there is nothing whatsoever in James 2 which conflicts with the doctrine of justification *sola fide*.

As we have been making our way through the Epistle of James, we come to the second half of James chapter 2. I have mentioned throughout our series that this section of James is somewhat of a sore spot to confessional Protestants who champion Paul’s doctrine of justification. One reason for this is because when addressing justification, the *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Canon X)—Rome’s official response to the Protestant Reformation—teach that justification is a day to day process, depending upon how effectively people submit themselves to God’s grace, so that they increase their justification over time, and hopefully, attain final justification. James 2:24 is cited by the Council of Trent as a proof-text supporting Rome’s view that justification is a process connected to the merit of our good works.

Granted, James seems to be saying something quite different than Paul. And those who oppose the Reformation doctrine of justification often seize upon comments made by James in this chapter to prove that we are not justified by faith alone, but that we are justified by faith plus continual inward transformation, and the performance of good works which merit (earn) a reward from God.

Let me be clear here. Yes, James is saying something quite different from Paul is saying. But James is not contradicting Paul. The two men are addressing two completely different issues. And this is the critical point we need to keep in mind as we proceed. Recall that in our first sermon on James, I labored to establish the fact that James wrote this epistle sometime in the mid 40’s of the first century. If you’ve not heard that first sermon, I would encourage you to get a copy because the date of writing of this epistle, understanding the context in which it was written, and then keeping in mind the specific issue which James is addressing, is the key to understanding James’ teaching on justification. When these factors are in place, the supposed controversy between James and Paul, and the apparent contradiction between James 2:24 and passages like Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:28, is easily resolved. In fact, there is no contradiction, since James is addressing a completely different matter than Paul is addressing.

There are three key points we have established in our series so far. First, James writes this epistle several years before the controversy broke out in Asia Minor between Jewish and Gentile Christians over the

role of the ceremonial law in the justification of sinners. As we saw in Acts 15 when the Jerusalem Council convenes (about 48 A.D.), James, Peter, and Paul (along with all the elders of the church) were absolutely united in teaching that Gentiles are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, just as Jews were saved. This means that elsewhere in the New Testament (outside the Epistle of James), we have iron-clad evidence that the church was of one mind on the doctrine of justification *sola fide*. Christ saves us by grace, through faith, from beginning to end. Jesus does not give us grace so that we can improve ourselves and thereby earn a right-standing before God as Rome teaches. Given the fact that the apostles were of one mind on this critical doctrine in Acts 15, and since we believe in the inspiration of Scripture, we cannot interpret James in such a way as to contradict Paul, or vice-versa.

A second fact to consider is James' purpose in writing this letter. James is writing to Jewish Christians in Palestine and Syria who were enduring difficult times and facing great persecution. Paul's letter to the Book of Galatians written in A.D. 49, after the controversy over justification broke out in Asia Minor. James is writing to Jewish Christians with the intent of exhorting them to put their faith in Christ into practice. James is concerned that people in the churches to whom he was writing were professing to have faith in Christ, but not acting in a way consistent with their profession. They were mistreating the poor and favoring the rich (among other things). James exhorts his audience not to be mere hearers of the word, but to do the word (obey) once they've heard it. Therefore, it would only be natural for James to appeal to the account of Abraham, pointing out that he that believed God, but that his faith in the promise was confirmed (justified) by the fact that he actually took Isaac up on the mountain to sacrifice him when God commanded him to. Abraham believed the promise, but confirmed his faith by works.

Paul, on the other hand, is writing to address a controversy which James and the other apostles had already addressed at the Jerusalem Council, where James stood up and declared "*my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.*" After the Jerusalem council issued their decision, "certain men" made their way into Galatia and were arguing that Gentiles needed to become practicing Jews when they came to faith in Christ. Directly contradicting James and the rest of the apostles, these so-called "Judaizers" were insisting that Gentiles must keep the dietary laws, observe the feast days, and undergo circumcision in order to be justified.

James has already declared that as a result of "turning to God," Gentiles ought to avoid doing those things which offended their Jewish brethren. Paul's anger toward the Judaizer's heresy, presupposes Paul's agreement with James, Peter, and all the elders, that Gentiles are justified by grace through faith in Christ. Therefore, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul lets the Judaizers have it. He calls their teaching a false gospel, and anathematizes them because they are teaching something which the entire church had condemned and then demanded that they stop. In such a case, it is vital that Paul tell Gentiles in Galatia how they are justified before God—through the merits of Christ, received through faith alone apart from any works of law (circumcision, dietary laws, etc). With this teaching, James is fully in agreement. To ignore this fact and pit James against Paul is to do great violence to the word of God.

A third thing to consider is that James has already told us in this same chapter (verse 1), that he is writing to people who "hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." James is writing to Christians—people who according to James 1:18, have already been brought forth by God through the word of truth (the gospel). These are people in whom the word has already been implanted (1:21), and people who receive that word humbly when it comes to them. These are people for whom the law is no longer a standard of judgment and condemnation, but is now a law of liberty, which those who are truly Christians obey, because they trust in Christ who has fulfilled all of God's commandments, and who died

for all those times they transgressed the law of God. This is why James can demonstrate to us in verse 10 that the law renders all of us transgressors because we cannot keep it, and then turn right around and go on to speak of the law as a “law of liberty” because we have been shown mercy, and in turn, we must show that mercy to others. All of this related to James’ primary purpose in writing—we must not only hear the word of God, we must put it into practice and be “doers” of that word.

This means that before James even takes up the subject of justification, we must understand that he is addressing an entirely different issue than Paul is addressing. Paul is refuting false teachers who were adding works of law to faith as a condition of justification. James is writing before that controversy even broke out. He is exhorting Jewish Christians to obey the word which has brought them forth, which has been implanted in them, and which they receive with humility. There can be no doubt from the preceding verses that James assumes that those in his audience are *already* Christians. This means that James is writing to people who profess faith in Christ, and who need to accompany that profession of faith with good works. James is speaking to those in the churches who have been showing favoritism to the rich, and discriminating against the poor, conduct inconsistent with their profession.

So, James is not addressing the same question Paul is—“how do Gentiles become Christians?” And “do they need to trust in Christ and then undergo circumcision in order to be justified?” Paul says good works have no place whatsoever when it comes to the ground of our justification. No, says Paul, the only basis upon which we can be justified are the merits of Christ received through faith. James, on the other hand, is dealing with the question as to how can we tell if someone truly has faith. James’ readers must be aware that good works will accompany their profession of faith in Christ, if that profession is genuine. James is saying nothing more, but certainly, nothing less.

But in no sense whatsoever does James contradict Paul (or vice-versa). In fact, as we see in Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul agrees with James. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*” Every point in Paul’s assertion we have already found in the Book of James. Faith in Christ precedes good works. But faith in Christ, if it be genuine, will produce good works. Good works are not the ground of our justification before God. Rather good works are the fruit of a faith which has already justified the one doing the good works. Get this one right and the New Testament will make perfect sense. Miss this one, and suddenly everything associated with the gospel becomes muddy.

With this important background in our minds, we now turn to our text, James 2:14-26.

With this important background in our minds, we now turn to our text, James 2:14-26. In this section of chapter 2, James makes a general appeal to his readers that when someone claims to have faith, and there are no accompanying good works, their so-called “faith” can be called into question. James moves on to give an illustration in verses 15-16 drawn from the earlier discussion in chapter 2 about discriminating against the poor and favoring the rich. In verse 17 he offers up the conclusion that faith without works is dead. Then, in verses 18-19 James connects faith and works, as cause and effect—faith produces works. James then appeals to the examples of Abraham and Rahab, sandwiched around his main premise in verse 24—“*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” In this section, James makes his main point three different ways. Faith, if not accompanied by works is dead (v. 17). Faith without works is useless (v. 20). Faith without works is not a living (or

justifying) faith (v. 26).¹ James primary point is simply this—genuine faith leads to the performance of good works. To put it another way—a person who claims to be a Christian (and professes faith in the Lord of glory) will demonstrate that faith to be genuine through the performance of good works.

In verses 1-13 James addressed the matter of the sin involved in discriminating against the poor and showing favoritism to the rich. James moves on in verses 15-16 to offer an illustration loosely tied to these previous verses. This tells us that James' discussion about faith, justification, and good works, is a response to those who hear, but don't do, as well as a warning to those who claim to have faith in the Lord of glory, but who then discriminate against the poor or show favoritism to the rich. James is obviously concerned that there are people who had made a profession of faith in Christ, but who still behave like non-Christians. This is the issue he is addressing as we go through the following.

In verse 14, James writes *“what good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”* Notice, James addresses his audience as ‘brothers.’ This indicates that he assumes that his readers who have true faith are already justified! His question is clearly aimed at those who have made a profession of faith in Christ, but who continue to wear their soiled clothing (sin), who favor the rich and discriminate against the poor, who show no interest in taming their tongues, and who behave in a worldly manner (the latter two items being themes in the next chapter). James asks his first question directly—*“what about those who claim to have faith, but have no works?”* Make no mistake about it, in asking this question, James is connecting genuine faith with good works in a cause and effect relationship. His question implies the following—if genuine faith in Christ is present, good works will also be present. This is because true faith in Christ also produces good works. In the second question, James presses home the obvious conclusion. Can the so-called “faith” of someone who has no good works, actually save them? The answer is “no.” Those whom God calls forth through the word, have the word implanted in them. That word produces a living faith. A living faith trusts Christ and results in the good works James expects. But someone who claims to have faith, without any accompanying works, demonstrates that they don't have true faith, and never have had true faith.

That James is dealing with those in the church who make a profession of faith, but show no signs of actually following Jesus becomes clear. Says James, *“if a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?”* As we see throughout this epistle, James' comments here reflect the teaching of Jesus—in this case Matthew 25:42-43, when Jesus says *“for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”* As James frames the matter, when a Christian sees someone in desperate need, and does nothing about that need, except to pronounce a flippant and trite greeting, James asks *“what good is that?”* This is but another way of asking if a person who ignores the suffering of his brethren has a genuine (justifying) faith in Christ.

James' response to someone who does this is framed in verse 17. *“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* The moral to the story is that someone who won't help a brother or sister in a time of crisis, is acting in such a way that we may question whether or not they've ever exercised saving faith in the first place. No doubt about it, a profession of faith, without any accompanying works, is not a credible profession. A true faith is not a “stand alone” faith. A true faith is accompanied by good works. In fact, a true faith (trust) in Christ produces good works. This is why James can be so emphatic about

¹ Moo, The Epistle of James, 119.

the fact that someone who claims to have faith, but lets his brother and sister go unclothed and hungry, may not have true faith.

To sharpen the point, in verse 18 James speaks of the objection raised by a hypothetical questioner who don't see any necessary connection between the presence of faith in Christ and the presence of good works. *"But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."* James simply will not allow for the possibility that someone can have a truth faith without works, or (on the flip-side) that there can be someone who has genuine good works which don't spring from faith. The two (faith and works) are inseparable and the relationship between them is crystal clear. A genuine faith is the cause of good works (the effect). And works done apart from faith are not good. The presence of good works is the sign that faith is genuine.

In verse 19, James now mocks his hypothetical questioner (*"someone will say . . ."*) by comparing their faith to the faith of demons. *"You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!"* Since even a demon believes that there is one God—in the sense of assenting to the truth of the proposition that there is one God who will certainly punish them eternally on the last day (causing them to "shudder")—what is the difference between what demons believe about God, and what some professing Christian believes, if that so-called faith never leads to the production of good works? Christians may give assent to the truth—they believe every article of the Creed to be true—but they never truly trust Christ, never allow what is in their heads to make its way into their hearts and then into their lives. Someone can believe the right things about God, and yet not have genuine faith. The standard which James applies throughout this epistle to tell "which is which," (which is genuine faith, which is a *mere profession* of faith) is the presence of good works. As James sees it, if faith is genuine, good works will be present. To put into the context of James' epistle, true faith will not discriminate against the poor, favor the rich, nor ignore the naked and hungry who profess the name of Christ.

Continuing to spar with the hypothetical questioner from verse 18, in verses 20-21 James goes to point them in the direction of the Old Testament, specifically to Abraham, "the man of faith." Says James, *"Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?"* The proof to the person foolish enough to claim that faith without works is still a genuine faith is the story of Abraham. Every Jew knew this story, so it is only natural that James would direct his reader to Abraham for the proof that trust in God's promise manifests itself in action. As is clear from Genesis 15:6 (our Old Testament lesson), Abraham believed God's promise, and Abraham was reckoned as righteous—i.e., he was declared to be right with God on the basis of the fact that God's righteousness (as anticipated in the perfect obedience of Christ) was reckoned (credited, imputed, granted) to him through faith. *"And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."*

But the story of Abraham doesn't end in Genesis 15. In Genesis 22, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. This was not only foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ (when the father offers up his beloved son on Calvary) it is also a test of Abraham's faith. What if Abraham had said, "I believe the promise," but then did not do what God commanded him to do with Isaac. Would Abraham's faith be genuine? Would it be the kind of faith which justifies? No. It would not be genuine faith at all because at the end of the day Abraham would have shown that he really didn't trust God. But since Abraham did believe God, when commanded, he did exactly what God told him to do. He took Isaac up the mountain.

But what does James mean when he speaks of Abraham being justified by works? Here's where context is everything. James is writing to Jewish Christians exhorting them to be doers of the word and not mere

hearers only. Now he introduces Abraham as his prime example. Abraham's faith in God's promise manifested itself in action, and as a result, Abraham visibly demonstrated the righteousness that he had by faith. In other words, Abraham was justified (declared righteous) before God when he believed the promise (Genesis 15:6). But Abraham's faith was confirmed (shown to be genuine) when he offered Isaac. Paul uses the word "justify" in the context of determining how sinners are declared righteous before God. James speaks of justification as the proof (confirmation) that Abraham's faith was genuine. Abraham was justified before God when he believed God's promise. But Abraham's works justified him in the sense of confirming that his faith in YHWH was genuine.

Not only is this a plausible way to understand the story of Abraham—where we see that faith leads to action—but this is what James has been arguing all along throughout this epistle. If you want to know what it means to be a doer of the word and not a mere hearer only, look to Abraham. Abraham was justified before God through faith. And the genuine nature of his faith was itself justified (confirmed) when he offered up Isaac.² How was Abraham justified?—by faith alone. How can we tell that Abraham's faith was genuine—by good works.

Therefore, James is able to conclude in verses 22-23, "*you see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God.*" James now points out what has been implied in this imaginary dialogue all along. Faith and works should not be pit against each other. Rather there is a cause and effect relationship. Because Abraham's faith in the promise was genuine, his faith was "working along with his works" (there's a word play in the Greek sentence here). Because Abraham's faith was active (living) it resulted in good works which completed his faith. Like Paul, James can cite Genesis 15:6 and appeal to Abraham. Paul can appeal to the fact that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised (to clobber the Judaizers—i.e. Romans 4:11), while James can appeal to the fact that Abraham was justified by his works because he believed the promise in such a way that he acted in faith when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's faith in the promise was justified (confirmed) by what he did, his good works.

Therefore, when James states in 2:24 that "*you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone,*" we can now understand what James means. Paul is referring to how people become justified—apart from works. James is referring to how we know someone's profession is genuine—the presence of good works demonstrate that faith is genuine. Once again, John Calvin absolutely nails it. "Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned righteous."³ It is all a matter of perspective. How are people justified?—by faith alone. How do we tell if faith is genuine?—a person's faith is justified by works.

To further ram home the point, in verse 25, James takes up the story of Rahab. "*And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?*" Why Rahab, whose story is told in Joshua 2? Along with Abraham, Rahab was considered one of the most famous foreigners who identified themselves with Israel's God.⁴ When she

² See the discussion in; Moo, The Epistle of James, 132-136.

³ Calvin, Institutes, III.XXVII.2

⁴ Moo, The Epistle of James, 143.

hid Joshua's spies from Jericho's king, she did so because she had heard about all those things YHWH had done for Israel. Because she believed in YHWH, she hid the Israeli spies at the risk of her own life. No question about it, her faith in YHWH was justified, because she acted upon that faith. Even a Gentile prostitute who comes to faith in YHWH, confirms the presence of faith through good works.

As James comes to the end of his argument in verse 26, his conclusion is almost anti-climatic. "*For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*" Just as a corpse can do nothing when the spirit departs, so too someone who claims to have faith, but who does not have works, has dead faith (and is therefore not alive). But this is simply the negative way of re-stating the point James made back in 1:18. If God has brought us forth through the word, we have a living faith and we are justified before God apart from works. But if we have a living faith—given to us by God— we will also do good works, proving (justifying) that our faith is genuine.

As for application, it is all very simple. If we here at Christ Reformed claimed to have faith in the Lord of glory, then that faith will be proved genuine by our good works. If our faith is genuine, when the need arises we will care for the poor, clothe the naked, and feed the hungry. If our faith is genuine, we will strip off our sins, just as we take off our dirty clothes. If our faith is genuine, we will not discriminate against the poor, or show favoritism to the rich. If our faith is genuine, we will tame our tongues and not seek to be friends with the world. If our faith is genuine, we will not boast about tomorrow, and we'll be patient in our suffering.

All of these matters are addressed by James in this epistle, and given as exhortations which Christians are to obey, because they already have faith in Christ. Because Jesus Christ has died for our sins (our infractions of the law) and because he has perfectly obeyed God's commandments (fulfilling all righteousness), we are justified through our faith in Christ. But that faith in Christ is proved genuine when, good works flow out of justifying faith. This is what James means when he says "faith apart from works is dead." And nothing James says here, contradicts anything said by Paul.