

James 2:14-26 Justified by Works or Justified by Faith

It seems to me the main theme of this letter from James is this: Genuine faith in God must be evident in life. Over and over again James is writing against hypocrisy. One commentator says, “faith said” must correspond to the “life led” (McCartney). And practically, isn’t this one of our main conversations with non-believers who look at the way we live our lives. I spoke with one man recently who said, *“I respect my dad who was a ‘Christian.’ He went to church every week. But, he was a different man at home. As I think about it, he was really a hypocrite. God rest his soul.”* I think most of us have had these conversations, which is why this passage is so important for us. How do we respond to an unbelieving world that sees so many inconsistencies? How do we look at our own lives and know with assurance that our faith is real? These truths are of utmost importance to us. God is good to give us these words! I would like to divide the sermon into two parts and then end with some applications. In the first part we will look at James’ main truth of the text which is this: Faith without works is dead (v. 17). Or to put it another way: faith without works is useless (v. 20). It is also interesting that James uses the phrase “justified by works” three times (v. 21, v. 24, and v. 25). So, our first part of the sermon is: Justified By Works. In the second part of the sermon, I would like to consider Paul’s use of the phrase: “Justified by faith.” So let’s begin.

1. Justified By Works. What does this mean? To put it simply, faith is not real unless good works follow. I believe this to be the main truth of this passage. James is concerned with PRACTICAL theology. In v. 14 he says, **“if someone says he has faith but does not have works, can that faith save him.”** And he gives an example saying, **“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?”** And then he says, **“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”** Look also at v. 20: **“Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless.”** This is strong language. To James, this is not real faith. In fact, it is “DEAD” and “USELESS.” In Luke Jesus uses the picture of salt, saying, **“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile, It is thrown away . . .”** (Luke 14:34-35).

In the Sermon on the Mount, concerning good works, Jesus says, **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits”** (Matt. 7:15-20). This is also the simple teaching of James. You will know faith by its fruits.

He uses the example of Abraham and Rahab to make his point. Look at vv. 21-24: **“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; 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. You see that a person is justified by**

works and not by faith alone.” Let’s first consider the faith of Abraham. Abraham came from a pagan family living in the Land of Ur (Today, Southwestern Iraq). And God appeared to Abraham and said, **“Leave your family and go to a land I will show you . . . I will make of you a great nation . . . I will bless you and you will be a blessing . . . In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed”** (Gen. 12:1-4). And we read further that Abraham believed God. He believed in these promises. This is faith. But how do we know that his faith was real? We know because he obeyed. He took his wife and his nephew Lot, and all their possessions and they set out for this land. And many years later, God tested Abraham in the most shocking way. He said, go and sacrifice your son, Isaac. And what did Abraham do? He obeyed. And in the end, God provided a ram in his place. Here we see faith, which is belief in God and his promises. And we know his faith was real because of obedience! V. 22 **“faith along with his works,”** and **“faith was completed by his works.”** And v. 21: **“justified by works.”** In other words, we know faith by what it does.

Also, consider Rahab the prostitute. She was a great sinner, not an Israelite, living in Jericho, the great walled city. As Joshua led Israel from the dessert into the Land of Caanan, they began their conquest with Jericho. They sent spies to determine its strength. And Rahab the prostitute protected these men. And later, she and her household will be saved. Here we see the same principle. She believed in the God of Israel and his promises. And we see her faith in hiding the spies. Now, in either case, if Abraham or Rahab had not obeyed the commands of God, could we say they have real faith? NO! WITHOUT WORKS FAITH IS DEAD AND USELESS!

Now, there are lots of applications for us. But, let’s consider the one right before us. It seems to me that there is a mixed group of believers, many are poor, some are wealthy. And the wealthy are showing partiality (2:1), not considering their poorer brethren. And James says for this there will be judgment for not showing mercy (2:12-13). This is a warning! This means our good works must begin among ourselves as the people of God. We must love the body of Christ by especially doing good to one another, which is to fulfill the royal law of love. If we have orphans and widows in our midst, we must look after them, by taking care of their needs (1:27). Jesus himself equates good works to our brothers and sisters as doing good works to him. **“If you’ve done it to the least of these you’ve done it to me”** (Matt. 25:45).

Now, I will have more applications later, but let’s move one to our next truth.

2. **Justified by Faith.** In other words, though good works accompany faith, those works are not the basis of our salvation. We may put it another way. God does not save BECAUSE we work. This would be works-based-righteousness. And doesn’t Eph. 2:8-9 say, **“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.”** There SEEMS to be a difference between Paul and James. Both James and Paul use the same word “justify” as regards to faith and salvation. Look at v. 21. James says, **“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?”** And also v. 24: **“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”** And then again in v. 25: **“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.”** Now, as we’ve seen, from James’ perspective, it is pretty simple. *“There is no real faith without real works.”* To Jimmy Hubbard they are like peanut butter and jelly. To me

they are Duke's mayonnaise with my tomato sandwich. You will not have one without the other. And even Paul says in Rom. 2:13: **"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."** So why all the fuss?

The difficulty comes in Paul's treatment of justification in the Book of Romans. Turn to cp. 3 and keep your place there for a minute. Look at 3:20. Paul says, **"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight . . ."** Now look at vv. 23-24: **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are (what) justified by his grace as a gift . . ."** Now look at v. 28: **"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."** And then Paul also uses Abraham as an example that no one is saved by works. In 4:1-2 he says, **"What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?"** (Here, he is speaking directly about the works of Abraham.) And then he says in v. 2: **"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about . . ."** And then in v. 3 he emphasizes, not works, but faith when he says, **"For what does the Scripture say? Abraham BELIEVED God, and it was counted to him as righteousness . . ."** Now, look at 5:1: **"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."**

So, for those "black and white" folks out there, which is it? Are we justified by works? Or, are we justified by faith? YES! There is really NO disagreement! James and Paul are emphasizing faith and salvation from two different perspectives. As we've seen, it is easy with James: Works and faith go hand in hand. Works are the product of faith. If there are no real works, there is no real faith. And in this way, our works "justify" or "prove" our faith. Paul, on the other hand, is considering justification from a different perspective. He is considering HOW, or on what BASIS a sinner can stand before a holy God. *"How can God look at you as a sinner, as one who has broken his law, both in your heart and in your actions, and then find you righteous, or justified?"* In other words, God is holy. We are sinners to the core. And no matter what we do concerning our works, we are still unrighteous or unjustified in all our good works before God. He is addressing the basis of our standing before a holy God. And in the end, he says that it is by "faith" we are justified. Works, in and of itself does not justify "IN THE WAY PAUL IS SPEAKING."

Look back to Rom. 3:21-22: **"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— . . ."** Now notice what he says next in v. 22: **"the righteousness of God through . . . FAITH in Jesus Christ for all who believe."**

At the end of the day, faith looks to Christ! This is the purpose of faith. This is what faith was created for. In fact, if faith is not connected to Christ, then what good is it. What if you are shooting your bow and your aim and goal is to hit bull's eye. What if you shoot 3 arrows and all of them are close, but you still miss the bull's eye? You might say, *"That's pretty good. Though I did not hit it, I'm a pretty good shot."* But, in the end no matter how much you shoot all around, you didn't hit the target. This is what the world is doing. They look at their good works. They look at their good deeds. They look at their works of charity toward their neighbor. They look at their ascent to sporadic church attendance. But, in the end, there is no love and dependence upon the Son of God. They've missed the mark. They've missed the very creative purpose of faith. I

don't care if your "faith" moves Grandfather mountain into the ocean. If you miss Christ, you've missed the mark. And your works are still filthy rags in the sight of God. At the same time, when faith hits the bulls eye, good works follow.

This is the Gospel. This is the GOOD NEWS. When our faith hits the bulls eye of Christ, it does what it supposed to do. This why God created faith and gives it to us. You see, Christ did not sin, EVER, in both his motive and his actions. His WORKS were always pleasing to a holy God. And as ONE who has completely fulfilled the law of God, he laid down his life as a perfect sacrifice on the cross. And God punished him, though all his works were justified before God. And all the punishment of death and hell we deserve because of our sins, fell upon Christ! And God says to a world of sinners, *"I love you! Here is MY SON! Look to Him, all the ends of the earth and be saved. Believe on him. Put your "FAITH" in him. In this way, you are justified before me."* Brothers and sisters, this is faith. And then, do you know what happens when we are justified by faith. Works follow! And we know works follow because there is now a great power that works in us. Christ gives us the most precious gift; the Holy Spirit. And if works do not follow a profession, there is no faith. There is no justification, from James' perspective or Paul's perspective. Faith itself does not save. JESUS SAVES. But, salvation does not come except through the means of faith. This means that faith is never by itself. It is connected to Christ.

To finish up this morning, by way of application, let's look at some specific errors concerning faith and salvation.

i. Do not separate faith and works. Look at v. 18: **"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."** And then in v. 26 he says, **"For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."** Example: This one comes from our SB context. I've had so many visits through the years of a person who has made a profession, but rarely comes to church to gather with the people of God. And if you question their salvation, they look back to their baptism or their church membership or some good work they used to do in association with the church. And though they show no good works, they separate what they call "faith." If that's you, you aren't fooling many people. Do not be deceived on this very important truth. At the end of the day, a person with faith looks unto Christ, with a repentant heart, and by the grace of God, is obedient to the commands of Christ.

ii. Do not confuse faith with intellectual consent. Look at v. 19-20. **"You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?"** A great number of people in the south give an intellectual assent to Christ, but they are no different than the demons. Faith is more than intellect. And James' point is the same: Show me your works! In the Book of James alone, consider these works: Ex: "steadfastness" (1:4), "patient in suffering" (5:7 ff), "godly use of money," "not having a friendship with the world" (4:4), "growth in wisdom as we ask God" (1:5), "godly use of the tongue," "hearing and doing by taking care of orphans and widows," "not showing partiality," "proper use of money," "prayers for the sick," etc. Again, at the end of the day, a person with faith looks unto Christ with a repentant heart, and by the grace of God, is obedient to the commands of Christ.

iii. Do not confuse an emotional response with faith, if consistent works do not follow this response. Our culture is full of “emotional” responses that masquerade as faith. I’ve heard people say, “*God spoke to me in a vision*” as they recall some big experience. Others attend some type of “revival” meeting and respond in a moment of emotion, thinking this is faith. And these folks may continue in some kind of good works for a while, but later, they fall back again to the same old same old. James’ response: “**Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.**” Let me say again, “Again, at the end of the day, a person with faith looks unto Christ with a repentant heart, and by the grace of God, is obedient to the commands of Christ.” Doesn’t our Lord Jesus say, “**He who endures to the end will be saved**” (Matt. 24:13).

Brothers and sisters, we are justified by our works. In other words, works follow faith. At the same time, we are justified by faith. We look unto Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. He is our righteousness. He is our standing.