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ARE WE JUSTIFIED BY WORKS?

James 2:20-26

By

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James Lesson 11

Are We Justified by Works?
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As a Roman Catholic priest and monk, Martin Luther fastidiously observed all of the rituals and disciplines of his order, but none of them seemed to bring him close to God. He feared God and His righteous judgment, but he also hated God because of His demand for perfect righteousness. Try as he might, Luther knew that he could never satisfy God's standard.

Finally, after years of struggle, he was wrestling with Paul's words in Romans 1:17, that in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" Here are Luther's own words (cited in *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Tim Dowley, ed. [Eerdmans], p. 366):

"I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God,' because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous.... Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven."

Stephen Nichols explains (*Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* [P & R Publishing], p. 38),

Luther moved from viewing righteousness as active, as something he had to achieve, to viewing it as passive, something Christ achieved on his behalf, apprehended not by our merits but by faith alone. The Reformation plank of *sola fide*, faith alone, was born, and Luther was born again.

But coming out of his struggles with trying to work his way to right standing with God, Luther stumbled over the Epistle of James. In his preface to the New Testament of 1522, he called James “an epistle of straw.” Although he did not reject James from the canon of Scripture, he once remarked “that he would give his doctor’s beret to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul” (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* [Abingdon Press], p. 259). That is my task today, but I am privileged to stand on the shoulders of many wise men who have gone before me!

As I said last week, this is not simply an academic debate, because it deals with the most crucial question, “How can I be right before a holy God?” *Nothing* is more important than understanding the biblical answer to that question! We need to be clear: Are we justified by *faith alone*, or are we justified by *faith plus our works*? That issue divided the Reformers from the Roman Catholic Church and it is still the major issue between Roman Catholicism and the evangelical Protestant church today. There are many other issues, such as the role of the pope, the sacraments, the veneration of Mary, prayers to the saints, penance, purgatory, etc. But the most crucial issue is this matter of how a person gains right standing before God. Of course, this is a debate about the gospel itself.

Let me review what I said last week about how we need to approach a difficult text such as the one before us. First, we must *assume that the Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself* in Scripture. James and Paul are not at odds. Second, we must seek to *understand the particular problem* that each author was addressing. Third, we must be careful *not to read Paul’s use of words into James*, or vice versa. Finally, we must seek to *synthesize all that the Bible teaches* on a particular topic into one harmonized, unified whole. When we do that with regard to justification, we learn that both James and Paul teach that...

We are justified by faith alone, but good works
prove that our faith is genuine.

1. James believed, with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone.

We saw last week that James teaches that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We see the same thing in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council. The debate there was over the

matter of whether Gentiles were saved by faith in Christ alone, or whether they also had to keep the Jewish rite of circumcision. After much debate, Peter stated (Acts 15:9), "and He made no distinction between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles], cleansing their hearts by faith." He continued (15:11), "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." James then got up and affirmed what Peter had stated. He went on to request that believing Gentiles abstain from certain matters so that they would not offend the Jews. But the important thing is, James agreed that God saves us and cleanses our hearts by grace through faith. Good works are not mentioned.

"But," someone may object, "Paul says (Rom. 3:28), 'For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.' He also said (Rom. 4:5), 'But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.' But James states that Abraham and Rahab were justified by works (James 2:21, 25). He plainly says (2:24), 'You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.' How can you possibly reconcile these words with Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone?"

First, we must keep in mind the two different problems that each man was addressing. Paul was writing to those who taught that we must add our works to faith in Christ in order to be justified. He stated plainly that to do so was to preach a false gospel and to put oneself under condemnation (Gal. 1:6-9). James, however, was writing to those who claimed that they had saving faith, but their lives did not show it. Their profession of faith was mere words, with no evidence of a changed life.

Also, Paul and James were using the word "justified" in different senses. Paul was looking at God's initial declaration that the believer is righteous through faith in the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:22). In Romans 4:3, Paul cites the same verse that James 2:23 cites, Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Paul uses it to argue that Abraham was not justified by his works, but by faith alone. He was looking at the *beginning* of a person's right standing with God.

But James uses the verse and the word "justified" differently. James says (2:21) that Abraham was justified by works when he

offered up Isaac his son on the altar. He then explains (2:22), "You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled..." and then he cites Genesis 15:6. The event of Abraham's faith (Gen. 15:6) took place at least 30 or 40 years before Abraham offered Isaac on the altar. James says that his obedience in offering Isaac *perfected* his faith and *fulfilled* the Scripture that refers to his initial faith. So James is not looking at the beginning of Abraham's faith, but rather at its mature outcome many years later.

James may be using the word *justify* in one of two senses (Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 134-135). It may mean "to vindicate in the judgment." Both the Old Testament and Jesus frequently use the word "righteousness" to refer to actual conduct. Moo explains (*ibid.*),

If James uses the verb with this sense, then he will be claiming that the ultimate vindication of the believer in the judgment is based on, or at least takes into account, the things that person has done. So "justify" in Paul refers to how a person gets into relationship with God, while in James it connotes what that relationship must ultimately look like to receive God's final approval.

Or, sometimes *justify* has the sense of "demonstrate to be righteous or right." In this sense, James would be claiming that the righteousness that Abraham had obtained from God by faith (Gen. 15:6) was demonstrated openly when he obeyed God by offering Isaac on the altar (Gen. 22). But whichever view is taken, Moo explains (*ibid.*, p. 136),

James is intent on demonstrating that Abraham's faith went much further than mere intellectual assent.... He therefore emphasizes that Abraham's faith was not confined to a mental reorientation at the time of his "conversion" or to an occasional verbal profession but that it was an active force, constantly at work along with his deeds.

There is one other factor to consider in reconciling James and Paul. When James says (2:24) "that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone," the addition of the word "alone" shows that he is referring to the false faith that he has been talking about in this

section (Moo, p. 141). This “bare faith,” or faith that does not result in a life of good deeds, is not the kind of justifying faith that Paul talks about in Romans 3 & 4. Paul often spoke about “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; cf. 15:18). He often emphasized the role of good deeds as a result of God’s grace in the lives of His people (Titus 2:14; 3:5-8). So both Paul and James would agree that genuine faith that justifies always results in a life of good deeds. False faith that is an empty profession does not justify.

Moo (p. 141) sums it up this way, “If a sinner can get into a relationship with God only by faith (Paul), the ultimate validation of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produce (James).” He then cites Calvin (*Institutes*, 3:17:12, Moo’s reference is incorrect), “And as 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.” Thus both James and Paul teach that we are justified by faith alone.

2. If we think that we can be saved by faith that does not result in works, we are spiritual fools (2:20-25).

James does not mince words! He calls the one who thinks that he can have saving faith that has no effect in his life a “foolish fellow” (2:20). He is using the word in the sense of the Book of Proverbs, that we are spiritually foolish. He asks, “Do you want evidence?” He proceeds to give that evidence from Abraham’s faith (2:21-23), after which he restates his thesis (2:24). Then he gives evidence from Rahab’s faith (2:25). He concludes with a brief illustration and restatement of his point (2:26).

A. Abraham’s works proved that his faith was genuine (2:21-23).

Abraham was not saved by his obedience in sacrificing Isaac. Rather, that obedience proved the reality of his previous saving faith. Hebrews 11:8 states, “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed....” That verse refers to his obedience in leaving his homeland and going to the promised land. But Hebrews 11:17 adds, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac....” In fact, all through Hebrews 11, we read of what the heroes of faith *did*. By faith, Abel offered a better sacrifice. By faith, Noah built the ark.

By faith, Moses chose to endure ill-treatment with God's people and leave Egypt. All through the chapter we see how faith acted.

It is the same point that James is making, that faith is not mere words, without action. Genuine faith *works*. The proof that Abraham believed God is seen in his actions: He obediently offered up Isaac. Genuine faith and works are inseparable, because genuine faith always results in good works.

James here is reflecting the words of Jesus when He said (Luke 6:43-44),

“For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush.”

Note also that James adds (2:23) that Abraham “was called the friend of God.” That expression is used twice in the Old Testament to describe Abraham (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8). It would be pretty impressive for someone to say that the President is his friend. It would be even more impressive for the President to call that man his friend. How much more amazing it is that God calls us His friends! Jesus connected friendship with Him with obedience when He said (John 15:14), “You are My friends if you do what I command you.”

So the obedient faith that James is describing is not just outward obedience to a list of commandments. It is certainly not a grudging obedience to a cruel taskmaster. Rather, it is an obedience that involves personal friendship with the holy God of the universe! So when you believe in Christ as the one who died for your sins, God not only declares you righteous. He also calls you “into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9!)

B. Rahab's works proved that her faith was genuine (2:25).

James may have picked Rahab to contrast with Abraham. He was the revered patriarch; she was the redeemed prostitute. He was the father of the Hebrews; she was a pagan foreigner. He was a man; she was a woman. Or, there may be a subtle comparison, in that both Abraham and Rahab were models of faith and hospitality, in contrast to the dead faith of the man in 2:15-16 (Moo, p. 143).

Rahab's story is told in Joshua 2 & 7. She ran an inn in Jericho that also was a house of ill repute. When the two Hebrew spies came to town, she hid them from the king's men and then sent them out by a way so that they could escape. But before she sent them off, she testified of how she had heard of what the Lord had done for Israel in delivering them from Egypt and in the victories that they had won in the wilderness. She added (Josh. 2:11b), "for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath." That was her verbal confession of faith. Then she secured their pledge to save her and her family from the coming destruction and slaughter of Jericho.

James' point is that Rahab didn't just say, "I believe in your God," and then allow the king's men to arrest the spies. Rather, at the risk of her own life, she helped these men to escape and then she carefully obeyed their instructions about how she and her family could be spared when Israel invaded Jericho. Her faith was not just empty words. Her faith *worked*.

It is interesting that Rahab is usually referred to in the Bible as Rahab *the harlot*, even after her conversion. Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell], 6:983) draws several lessons from James' mention of Rahab. First, her life points to "the wonderful power of faith in transforming and changing sinners." She left her evil life and although she was a Canaanite, she is later included in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5). What amazing grace!

Second, her example shows how highly God regards an operative faith to obtain His mercy and favor. No matter how great your sins, the Bible promises, "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

Third, her life shows that where great sins are pardoned, there must be great acts of self-denial. She had to prefer the honor of God and the good of His people ahead of the preservation of her own country. She had to abandon her former friends and turn completely from her former course of life in order to be saved. To follow Christ, we must count the cost and turn from our sins.

Finally, the fact that she is still called Rahab *the harlot*, even after salvation, shows that "her former character must be remembered; not so much to her dishonor as to glorify the rich grace and

mercy of God." It is good for all of us to remember, "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see" (John Newton, "Amazing Grace").

So James, with Paul, believed that we are justified by faith alone. But also, with Paul, he believed that good works prove that faith is genuine. Both Abraham and Rahab demonstrate this. Their faith was not just empty profession, but it resulted in obedience in some very difficult situations. Finally, James concludes:

3. Conclusion: Faith without works is dead faith (2:26).

James (2:26) uses a brief analogy to cement his point: "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." If you see a body that is not breathing, you can conclude, it's a dead body. If you see "faith" that does not produce good works, you can conclude, it's dead faith, not the genuine thing. Works are not added to faith, but rather they are inextricably a part of genuine faith. If you see someone breathing, you don't think, "That guy added breathing into his repertoire!" Rather, breathing is part of being a living body. Matthew Henry (*ibid.*) uses a different analogy to explain: "Faith is the root, good works are the fruits, and we must see to it that we have both."

Conclusion

Although we've had to wade through some detailed explanations to see how James and Paul fit together, as I said at the outset, this is *not* just an academic matter! The entire gospel is at stake! Charles Simeon (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 20:70) offers two wise bits of counsel: (1) Do not separate faith and works; (2) Do not confound them.

There are those in our day that *separate faith and works*. One of my former seminary professors and many men from that seminary have formed a group called the Grace Evangelical Society. They think that they are preserving salvation by faith alone in Christ alone by their teaching. But in reality they deny what Scripture teaches about the nature of genuine faith, that it is inseparable from a life of good works. For example, they teach that someone may believe in Christ for salvation, and yet live a completely sinful, worldly life. He may even deny Christ subsequent to his profession

of faith, but he will be saved because he believed, and “once saved, always saved!”

But the Bible clearly teaches that if God imparts new life to a formerly dead sinner, that new life and the saving faith that God grants will inevitably show itself in a life of good deeds (John 5:28-29; 1 John 3:7-10). This does not mean that true believers never sin. It does not mean that anyone ever perfectly follows the Lord. But it does mean that the direction and motivation of life is decidedly different in the one whose heart has been changed by God’s grace. Don’t separate faith and works!

But, also, *do not confound faith and works*. Two factors make this a prevalent error. First, human nature since the fall is oriented towards works-righteousness. Pride makes us think that we can be good enough to earn God’s favor. We erroneously think that God will grade on the curve, and since we’re better than average, we’ll get into heaven because of our good works. That is a spiritually fatal mistake!

Second, the pervasive influence of the Roman Catholic Church has led many to confound faith and works. At the Councils of Trent, the Catholic Church specifically countered the teaching of the Reformers on justification by faith alone. I could quote many similar statements, but one must suffice: “If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema” (Session 6, Canon 12, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [Baker], 2:113.) To believe that is to confound faith and works and to deny the gospel of God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The following quote sums up well what James is saying:

Oh, it is a living, busy, active, might thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them. He who does not these works is a faithless man. He gropes and looks about after faith and good works, and knows neither what faith is nor what good works are,

though he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

That quote is from none other than Martin Luther (*Commentary to the Romans* [Kregel], p. xvii)! Luther and James agree after all! The biblical truth is, we are justified by faith alone, but good works prove that our faith in Christ alone is genuine, saving faith.

Application Questions

1. Which problem is greater: Separating faith and works, or confounding them? What Scriptures counter each error?
2. If genuine faith is proved by works, how many works does it take to prove it? How can we have assurance of salvation?
3. Why is it important to establish that the issue is not adding works to faith, but rather the nature of genuine faith?
4. What are some helpful illustrations you can use to help unbelievers see that no amount of good works can save them?

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