

Faith Works

James 2:14-26

We come this morning to what some people call the conflict between James and Paul. Martin Luther was so vexed by these verses that he discounted James as not even being inspired by God, famously calling it “an epistle of straw.” Others simply ignore or carelessly explain away what James is actually saying. On the other hand, there has been a resurgence in our day, even in the reformed church, to so emphasize the necessity of works that the doctrine of justification itself comes under attack. This is a very recent, contemporary debate, one that has roots deep in church history, the debate concerning the relationship between faith and works.

In a certain sense, I’m a little scared to preach from this text, but not because it is confusing. Rather, because it is so clear. It is so crystal clear to me, that my fear is that I must be missing something that others see in making it confusing. Actually, those fears are completely unfounded, for at times there is a great advantage to a simple-mindedness when studying Scripture. And this text really is clear and plain. Thus my desire is to make it clear to you.

There is a temptation in studying this text to spend all our time emphasizing what it doesn’t say! In other words, James doesn’t contradict Paul. James doesn’t contradict the historic, orthodox doctrine of justification by faith alone. And I won’t contradict that great doctrine either, for the Christian religion is rightly said to hinge upon this one great truth so well captured by the words of our shorter catechism in answer to question 33, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

I will not contradict the formulation of our Confession of Faith, Chapter 11, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification.” There is no other means by which we receive justification. There is no other ground upon which justification is granted. God forgives us our sins and accepts us as righteous solely on the basis of the righteousness of Christ imputed or credited to us. And we receive that justification by faith alone.

But that is not what is before us this morning in our study of James. The doctrine of justification is not before us, but rather what is before us is the foolish thinking of some who believed and even taught that you can have this faith, and claim it be real, without any evidence in the form of resulting good works. And just so that you are sure that these words of James don’t contradict our confessional standards, let me read the whole paragraph I quoted just a minute ago, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but workes by love.”

Dead faith won’t do! As it is sometimes expressed, we are justified by faith alone but not by faith that is alone. In other words, faith works! Faith produces works. The consequences of faith are the presence of works. And James goes out of his way to prove that by saying it in the negative form,

I. FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS NO FAITH AT ALL.

I’ll start with the illustration.

v.15-16

That is what James is talking about—words of encouragement

with no foundation in action. What good is it to say that you wish someone well who is struggling in great need if you withhold all tangible help from them. What good is it to see a man starving and say to him, “God be with you.” What good does it do to say to a man whose house has just burned down, “Sleep tight. Stay warm.”

It’s foolish, isn’t it, a completely foolish idea. That’s James’ point. And so his illustration shows that,

A. Faith without works is not saving faith.

So call it what you want, but it won’t get you into heaven. It does no good, least of all save you.

v.14

Again my point. There is nothing unclear about that. The mere profession of faith does not guarantee the presence of saving faith. Profession of faith is not hard! I can give you words to use, in fact, we do with new members and new Christians in their public profession. In evangelism, I can give you a prayer to pray, I can tell you to repeat after me certain words and phrases that express biblical Christianity. Rationally and logically, I can even teach them to you so that you understand them.

But a faith that does not produce works is not saving faith. A faith that does not result in certain things taking place in your life, namely good works, is actually no faith at all. And James’ words merely echo the words of our Lord Jesus,

Mat. 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every

tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

To continue this plain and simple explanation of James’ words, such a faith is dead.

B. Faith without works is dead.

v.17

I like the NASB translation here, “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” That’s the point. It is dead, because it is by itself! Again those words from our confession, “[Faith is] not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.”

So faith without works is dead in the same way that a corpse is dead being without the flow of blood from the heart. A physical body, by itself, has no life. Neither does faith. What makes this collection of chemicals we call a human body alive? When does the dust of the earth become a living soul? To the contrary, when does a living creature become a corpse? The answer to all those questions is the same. The definition of life, in spiritual terms, is the union of a body and a spirit. The origin of that life, as we know from Genesis, is that God breathes into us the breath of life. So James’ point is plain and obvious. Faith without works is a corpse. It might be composed of the same elements as a human being, but it is dead. Faith apart from works is dead. Faith that results in no works is dead. Faith without evidence is dead. Faith that has no consequences in your life is dead. Period.

Here is the real point that must be made clear. The works are not the essence of faith, they are not an element of faith, as if “faith” really meant “faithfulness.” That is an error being repeated

in our own day, and it became prominent a few years ago with the Federal Vision controversy. The idea becomes this, that you are justified by your faithfulness, your faithful obedience and performance of good works, and that becomes a great curse because the question then becomes very relevant, “How many works are enough works?” “How good is good enough?”

The truth is that works are not part of faith, but they are the result of it! And in this context, the necessary result of it. So are works necessary to be saved? Well, yes, if you understand it this way, they are a necessary consequence of real, genuine, saving faith. Faith by itself, without works, is dead. Thus saving faith “is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith.”

Just to make this point even clearer, James ends this passage by repeating this idea.

v.26

James has more to add. He calls such faith useless.

II. FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS USELESS.

v.20

The word means barren. Deficient. Without effect. Without fruit. I believe that it is a different Greek word than the one in verse 26 translated dead, and has a slightly different emphasis. It is useless because it is dead! It is good for nothing, least of all salvation, because it has no life. It is unprofitable and unproductive. And what is it that makes faith productive? What is the fruit of faith?

A. Faith is demonstrated by works.

That’s how you see it. That’s how you prove it. You show it!

v.18

James issues a great challenge to those who claim that their faith need not be proven. He poses a great problem for those who believe that the reality of genuine faith is proven merely by the verbal declaration of the one claiming it. Someone might praise you, for your works, but of themselves they claim that such works are not necessary for their claim of faith. And the rebuke is clear and forthright--you cannot show me your faith without your works. The sense of the words is this, “I defy you to prove to me the existence of your faith without works, for, of course, you cannot do it.”

The whole concept of faith is meant to be ridiculous without this demonstration. The whole notion that the mere claim of faith automatically legitimizes the words themselves is false! Words of faith are not self-authenticating. They are not true and genuine just because they are spoken. They are shown to be true and genuine when they are demonstrated.

That is the same idea we use to describe love. You can say, “I love you,” but the appropriate response might be, “Show me!” Demonstrate your love. So husbands are not commanded simply to speak words to their wives, “I love you.” They are commanded to demonstrate that love,

Eph. 5:25 “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.”

1 John 3:16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

Love is useless, unless it is practiced, unless it is demonstrated. Love is not something you feel, it is something you do! So it is with faith. Faith whose life is not demonstrated by works is useless. And as I began, actually it is dead faith, which is to say no faith at all. Very much related to that,

B. Faith goes beyond mere verbal assent.

Faith is more than simply agreeing with a certain proposition, or set of propositions. To be specific, merely saying that you believe in God is something far less than genuine faith. After all, the devil believes in God!

v.19

There is even a measure of doctrinal orthodoxy in that--God is one. That's true! It comes from one of the foundational doctrines of God claimed even by the Jews from the Old Testament, from, Deut. 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

It is good to believe that. Yea, even necessary! Those who believe in multiple gods are not Christians, they are unbelievers, condemned by their unbelief to an eternal judgment in hell. So orthodoxy is good! Believing in the right doctrine of God is good, "you do well."

But beloved, even the demons believe that, and rather than worship and adore this God they hate him and shudder under his dominion and power, they tremble. The demons, the servants of Satan, know that God is real and that he is true. And yet he is their enemy. So true faith must go beyond verbal assent.

Historically, faith has often been defined with three elements, and I believe this is a helpful distinction and explanation. Certainly faith must have this intellectual comprehension, knowledge or understanding. That is the foundation. Sadly, that's

what is often missing today, or at least underemphasized, by many who claim the name of Christ even with a good measure of sincerity. Even many Christians care very little about any sense of doctrinal knowledge of God, preferring the solely experiential reality of religion so much a part of our culture.

But faith must have this objective foundation. It is something you believe with your mind. But then, secondly, you must acknowledge it to be true. Faith is not at all the same as religious studies, or an academic discussion of comparative religions. Faith is something far different than the popularized declaration of our day, "It doesn't matter what you believe about God, just that you believe in God."

That's foolishness, with eternally catastrophic consequences. It is a matter of life and death what you believe, and orthodoxy in faith is necessary. You must believe that there is one God, and he alone is the true God. You must believe in this one God who has been revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture, and who became man and lived among us in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

But one more thing is part of saving faith, the aspect of trust. According to our confession, "the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace."

Those are words of trust! Personal trust. "Accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone." Those are words of commitment. Even words of action. Such is true faith. Or, as we read in our text,

III. PERFECT FAITH.

That is the meaning of,
v.22

That's not a bad translation, faith "made perfect." It can be well translated as it is in the ESV, "faith completed." Or faith made active. It means to consummate. The idea is of something that is brought to its intended end or purpose, something brought to maturity.

So what is it that brings faith to its completion. What is the intended purpose of faith? That's easy, and as I said at the outset, to me it is so perfectly clear. What is it that makes faith complete? Works!

A. The purpose of faith is to produce works.

Beloved, perfect faith is not faith that exists without sin or faith that somehow reaches the place where there is not the smallest evidence of any unbelieving flaws. Surely none of us would dare to possess such faith. Further, perfect faith is not something that you achieve in the realm of your emotions or your own subjective experiences. It is not something you "feel," as if your feelings made it perfect, though that is a very popular understanding of faith. Rather, perfect faith is faith that produces the proper result in your life. Perfect faith, completed faith, faith which has accomplished its purpose, is faith that has been made active. And clearly, James' point in all of this is that,

B. Faith is made active by works.

Herein is the example of Abraham.
v.21

Abraham was justified by works, but the works of obedience on Mt. Moriah when he offered up his son. What does that mean? Particularly when Paul seems to say just the opposite in,

Rom. 4:1 "What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." 4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. 5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."

And Paul has just defined his doctrine of justification,
Rom. 3:8 "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law."

Paul is defining for us the doctrine so clearly expressed in our confession, justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law. Those works of the law, that obedience, is not the ground upon which God grants forgiveness of sins. Obedience to the law is not the instrument by which the judge of heaven and earth declares us to be righteous. That judgment is what we call forensic--entirely in the realm of legal proceedings and courtroom action. It is that forensic justification that is the cornerstone of the biblical doctrine of salvation. And James doesn't contradict it.

He rightly adds to that doctrine this corollary, this consequence. Saving faith, by which we are justified, reaches its goal and objective when it is put into action. Saving faith, by which we are justified, is completed and made perfect when it is expressed in the obedience of good works. Thus Abraham was justified, that is proven and demonstrated to be a man of faith, by his works!

This word justified does mean something here something slightly different than when Paul uses it, and I say that because of James' own context. We don't have to guess what James means

when he writes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?” The very next verse defines for us what that justification is, namely,

v.22

Justification, as James uses the Greek word, refers to the completion of the purpose of faith. And that was the ultimate fulfillment of the forensic justification so clearly defined by Paul, as James also quotes from Genesis,

v.23

By faith, Abraham was reckoned to be righteous. It was an imputed righteousness, and on that basis he was called a friend of God. That relationship with God was not restored because of any merit in Abraham’s own works, but solely on the basis of that faith. It was faith made perfect and completed by works as cause and effect. Thus James declares,

v.24

Beloved, those words don’t contradict the doctrine of justification by faith. For this word justified does well carry the meaning of proven to be genuine, proven and demonstrated to be true. Completed and perfected by the consequences and results. For example,

Luke 7:35 “But wisdom is justified by all her children.”

Same word there, and it could be translated “vindicated.” It can be understood completed, perfected, made evident and active, which is exactly James’ sense here. For not only IS faith made active by works, but,

C. Faith MUST be made active by works.

It is necessary for faith to be made active, for without that working, as we’ve seen, faith is actually considered to be dead!

That point is obvious in this text. Inactive faith is dead faith, faith that cannot save. Thus inactive faith is really no faith at all!

So, by definition really, for faith to be faith, it must be activated. By works. And we get another example, Rahab.

v.25

Again, it was not her actions that earned for her God’s favor and thus her justification. It was not by the merit of her own works that she was justified before God. But rather, by her faith, which is recognized in Hebrews 11, by her faith which was obviously true faith because it was vindicated and proven genuine by her works, she was saved.

Heb. 11:31 “By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.”

She was saved by the instrument of faith, alone. And she was saved by a faith which demonstrated itself by works, faith which was made active by works, faith made perfect and complete by her works, faith which was vindicated by her works.

To give you an illustration of this, in Roman Catholic teaching, where divorce typically has not been allowed, the church will often grant an annulment. In other words, the church won’t grant a divorce but it might declare a marriage to be null and void--not ending a marriage but declaring that it never actually existed, an annulment. And as silly a distinction as that really is in reality, the theory behind it makes a little bit of sense. A marriage could be annulled if it were never consummated. If the marriage were never completed by the physical union of a husband and wife, it could be annulled, declared as if it never really existed in the first place.

That is an illustration of what we have here. Faith that is never consummated, never brought to its fulfillment or intended purpose, is actually declared to be null and void. So it is that faith, true saving faith, must be consummated. And just as it is that the consummation of a marriage is not the instrument by which the marriage is established, neither does a marriage make much sense without that consummation. Thus our works, never to be considered the meritorious ground upon which our relationship with God is founded, are very much to be considered as the consummation of that faith.

That is what is so clear about what James has to say. If you profess faith in God, yet that faith remains dead in inaction, you have no faith. If you claim to be justified by faith, but have no works to vindicate or demonstrate the reality of your faith, you have no faith, it's dead. And dead faith just won't do! Faith must be alive.

With that understanding, the meaning of James' words are clear

v.24 "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."

In other words, the truth of the matter as James expresses it is simple this, "I will show you my faith by my works." To put it even more simply, faith works.