

Justified by Faith Alone Apart from Works (James 2:14-26; Romans 3:19-28)

James vs. Paul?

We come this morning to the most controversial section in the book of James. The controversy arises from what James writes in the second half of the passage. What James writes in vv. 14-19 is not really controversial at all.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 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. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! (2:14-19)

James is simply echoing a pervasive New Testament warning about the danger of counterfeit faith. Every New Testament author warns his readers about a faith that is empty, vain, useless, dead. Jesus warned repeatedly of a counterfeit faith that, while very religious and very busy, does not produce true holiness through obedience to the royal law:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Mt 7:21-23)

His parable of the sower and the soils and the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:1-9, 18-23) make the same point (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43). Jesus told a crowd of false disciples in Jerusalem,

"If you abide in my word, [then] you are truly my disciples," (Jn 8:30)

minutes before they sought to stone Him. He told His true disciples in the Upper Room,

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (Jn 14:15)

The apostle Paul consistently warned the churches not to be deceived by empty professions of faith that do not produce the fruit of holiness from the heart:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21)

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph 5:5-6; cf. 1 Cor 6:9-11)

The book of Hebrews is filled with warnings against an empty faith that does not obey God, that does not renounce sin, and that does not persevere to the end.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (Heb 3:12-14; cf. 2:1-4; 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 12:12-17)

Peter urges his readers to make their calling and election sure by adding to their faith virtue, and knowledge, and self-control, and steadfastness, and godliness, and brotherly affection, and love (2 Pt 1:5-11). John rejects out of hand any claim to faith and salvation that is not accompanied by obedience and love:

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (1 Jn 2:3-4)

Jude warns the church that

certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)

So for James to say that faith without works is dead and useless and cannot save is neither new and nor controversial, not to anyone who has read the New Testament.

The controversy lies in the second half of this passage.

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? 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. 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? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (2:20-26)

Two points in particular make this passage controversial. First, James says that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (v. 24). That is startling to anyone who has read Paul’s letters, because it is precisely the opposite of what Paul writes in Romans 3:28:

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Rom 3:28)

And in Galatians 2:16:

... 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.
(Gal 2:16)

And let's not forget Ephesians 2:8-9:

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. (Eph 2:8-9)

James' statement in Jas 2:24 seems to directly contradict Paul's doctrine of justification. Second, both James and Paul cite Abraham as an example. Indeed, both quote the exact same verse to prove apparently contradictory points. James says that Abraham was "justified by works when he offered up Isaac upon the altar," in fulfillment of Genesis 15:6 (Jas 2:21-23). Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works, and he points to Genesis 15:6 as evidence.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (Rom 4:1-5)

This is a huge issue with massive implications. For one thing, if James and Paul contradict one another, then the inerrancy and authority of Scripture fall to the ground. How do we know who to believe, or if anyone is to be believed? For another thing, we are not talking about a peripheral issue or some obscure point of esoteric theology; this is a question of highest consequence. How can a sinner be reconciled to a holy God? Is it by faith alone apart from works, or by works and not by faith alone? We cannot afford to be confused on the answer, because we cannot afford to be wrong. The stakes are too high.

How are we to resolve this problem? Over the next two weeks, I am going to argue that James is *not* writing to contradict Paul on the doctrine of justification, but rather to contradict a perversion of Paul's doctrine of justification that was wreaking havoc in the churches to which he writes. It seems that Paul was the first apostle to have a clear grasp of the doctrine and its massive implications for the church.

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal 1:11-12)

This revelation of Jesus Christ, by which Paul received the gospel of justification by faith alone, must have occurred soon after his conversion on the Damascus Road, according to the timeline he lays out in Galatians 1-2. For fourteen years, Paul proclaimed the gospel of justification by faith alone, first in Damascus, briefly in Jerusalem, then in the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and finally in Antioch (Gal 1:18-2:1; Acts 9:20-30; 11:25-26), before embarking upon his first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). The point is that for fourteen years Paul was active in ministry in the regions to which James likely wrote. We know that not everyone understood Paul's gospel. Paul himself alludes to rumors, presumably among the Jews, that his gospel was in essence a license to sin:

And why not do evil that good may come? – as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. (Rom 3:8)

Paul was “slanderously charged” with teaching this, because this is what some people actually took away from his teaching. “If we are justified by faith alone, then our works don't matter.” Paul gives voice to such perversions of his teaching in Romans 6:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? (Rom 6:1)

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? (Rom 6:15)

I suspect those represent real statements Paul heard from real people. I also suspect that Paul's repeated admonition to not be deceived into thinking that those who practice sin will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 6:7; Eph 5:6) represents his pushback against this perversion of his gospel of justification by faith alone. Jude is likely writing to the same churches to which James wrote,¹ and warning against the same perversion of Paul's teaching, when he warns that

certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)

There was clearly a problem in the apostolic church of people taking the doctrine of justification by faith alone and deducing that holiness and obedience – that is, works – do not matter. Paul addressed this problem repeatedly, and James addresses it in James 2:14-26.

But... it is important to note that James and Paul agree on the gospel, particularly the doctrine of justification by faith alone. How do we know? Because they met to discuss the gospel on at least four occasions (Gal 1:18-19; 2:1-10 [Acts 11:29-30]; Acts 15:1-35; 21:17-26), and on those occasions James affirmed Paul's gospel and Paul's ministry, and vice versa. For instance, Paul records in Galatians 2:

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential [including James – 2:9]) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running or had not run in vain. . . . [W]hen they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me. . . (Gal 2:1-2, 7-9)

¹ Schreiner argues that Jude's audience was primarily Jewish, because of his heavy reliance upon Jewish history and tradition. This would likely place the congregation close to Palestine, or perhaps in Syria, Egypt, or Asia Minor; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 408-410.

In other words, James and Paul preached the same gospel, including justification by faith alone. Even though Jas 2:24 appears to directly contradict Rom 3:28 and Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone, as I argued in the introductory sermon on James, I think this is probably due to the fact that James wrote this letter prior to that meeting in Jerusalem that Paul describes in Galatians 2, in which Paul laid his doctrine before the other apostles and received their affirmation. Had James written after that meeting in Jerusalem, I suspect he might not have used language so directly opposite of Paul's.

It must be remembered that James and Paul are addressing two very different questions in James 2 and Romans 3 (as well as in Gal 2-3 and Eph 2:8-9). Paul is addressing the question of how a sinner may be declared righteous under the law and reconciled to God, and thus he contrasts faith and works as representative of two radically different approaches to God – the way of human merit, and the way of divine grace. James is addressing the question of what is true faith, what is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God, and thus he contrasts not faith and works, but a dead faith that does not work and does not justify, with a living faith that does work and does justify.² If we keep these very different purposes in view, we will find that James and Paul do not contradict one another, but rather complement one another. James would agree with what I am going to preach this morning from Romans 3, and Paul would agree with what I will preach next Sunday from James 2. In fact, I would argue that Paul makes in Romans 6 the very point that James makes in James 2:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? (Rom 6:1-2)

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were

² “James is not really contrasting faith and works, as if these were two alternative options in one's approach to God. He is, rather, contrasting a faith that, because it is inherently defective, produces no works and a faith that, because it is genuine, results in action”; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021; orig. 2000), 159-160.

*committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.
(Rom 6:15-18)*

In other words, the grace of justification and the faith that justifies do not leave the sinner unchanged, but transform him from a slave of sin into a slave of righteousness. For Paul, regeneration, justification, and sanctification are a package deal, related inextricably as cause to effect. You cannot have one without the other. If you are still living in sin (Rom 6:2), if you are still a slave of sin (6:16), if you have not become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed (the royal law!), then you have not been raised with Christ in regeneration and you have not been justified. You have a dead faith that cannot save. To put it simply, both James and Paul are in total agreement that man is justified before God by a faith that works.

As James and Paul are addressing two very different questions, I thought it wise to spend a sermon letting each respective apostle answer their respective question. For the remainder of our time this morning, let's listen to Paul answer the question, "How is a sinner justified under the law and reconciled to God?" Though Paul addresses this question in many of his letters, the clearest and most concise answer is found in Romans 3:19-28, a passage that concludes with Paul's famous statement that James 2:24 appears to contradict:

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Rom 3:28)

The Gospel of the Righteousness of God

In early July of 1505 a young law student was riding on horseback in the midst of a violent thunderstorm, returning to the University of Erfurt after a visit home. With the wind howling and the rain pouring, a bolt of lightning suddenly struck the ground near him, throwing him from his horse. Terrified of death and of the divine judgment he knew would follow, the young man cried out to St. Anne for help, vowing to become a monk if only she would deliver him. He survived, and two weeks later he fulfilled his vow. He left school and entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, much to the consternation of his unhappy father.

Never was there a more dedicated monk than Martin Luther. In his own words, he wrote,

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.³

Later in life, Luther would claim that the physical strain that he inflicted upon his body through fasting and exposure to the elements during his days in the monastery did permanent damage to his body. For what purpose did Luther perform all these works of piety? For what reason did he strive so hard to make himself pleasing to God? The answer is that Martin Luther was haunted day and night by his fear of God. By performing all these drastic works, Luther hoped somehow to atone for his sins, and to reconcile himself to an angry Judge.

Year after year in the monastery, Luther was tormented by this growing unrest in his soul. He was haunted by the righteousness of God. He knew that God was a righteous Judge who required of him perfect righteousness, and yet the harder he worked the more keenly aware he became of his own unrighteousness. He tried everything:

- He made confession to the priest. It is said that Luther would spend hours in the confessional, trying to name every sin he had committed since his last confession. When he had named all he could remember, he would leave the confessional and begin walking back to his room only to suddenly remember another sin and go running back into the confessional once more. His confessor once told him to go away and not return until he had committed a sin worth confessing.
- He would frequently fast days on end without eating so much as a crumb.
- He would deprive himself of blankets at night, nearly freezing to death while he slept.
- He even made a pilgrimage to Rome, the Eternal City, in 1510, thinking that if this pilgrimage did not earn him salvation and relieve his torment and his sense of guilt, then nothing would. While there, he visited all the holy relics, took mass in the ancient and sacred churches, and climbed the *Scala Sancta* (the “Holy Steps”) on his hands and knees, kissing each step and repeating the *Pater Noster* (the Lord’s Prayer).

³ Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1995; orig. 1950), 34. The following sketch of Luther’s spiritual struggle comes from Bainton’s classic biography.

Yet he left Rome more disillusioned and more aware of his alienation from God than ever.

Luther performed every work imaginable in order to commend himself to God, to earn God's favor and receive God's grace, and yet all these works left him feeling more empty, more tormented, more guilt-ridden, more terrified of God's righteous judgment than ever before.

Upon his return from Rome in 1511, Luther's superior at the monastery in Erfurt, Johann von Staupitz, determined that the best medicine for Luther's tormented soul was for him to immerse himself in the Bible. Let him wrestle with God in the pages of God's own book, Staupitz thought. He transferred Luther to a monastery in Wittenberg, and ordered Luther to study for his doctorate in theology, to begin preaching in the church, and to teach the Bible at the university. In all his prior studies and preparation for the priesthood, the Bible had not been a staple of his theological education. The Scriptures simply did not hold a place of prominence or authority in the medieval church. Luther had hardly read it. But now, for the first time, Martin Luther was confronted with the God of the Bible. In 1513, he began lecturing through the Psalms. In 1515, he taught through the book of Romans. In 1516, he embarked upon Paul's letter to the Galatians. It was while he was studying these Scriptures in preparation for his lectures and sermons that an incredible and dramatic change began to take place in Luther's heart and mind. In particular, it was his study of the book of Romans that brought Luther to conversion and changed the course of history.

Late one night, alone in the tower of the monastery in Wittenberg, as he was studying and meditating upon Romans 1:17, God opened Luther's eyes and he finally saw and understood the gospel, particularly the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Luther would later write:

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. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and the statement that “the righteous shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through 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 gate to heaven...⁴

Listen closely to what Luther was saying. Luther’s biggest problem was the righteousness of God. He knew that God was a righteous and holy God, who would bring every sin and every transgression of His law into judgment. And Luther, perhaps more than anyone before or since, was keenly aware of his own unrighteousness and sin. And so he feared, he trembled before, he *hated* this righteous God who required what Luther knew he could not give – perfect righteousness. What Luther found that night was that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – not only that righteousness by which God judges the unrighteous, but that righteousness which God gives as a gift of His grace to all who believe.

According to Paul, the gospel is the revelation of God’s righteousness. He writes in Romans 1,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (1:16-17)

At the most fundamental level, the gospel is the good news of the righteousness of God. In Romans 3:19-28, the apostle Paul unpacks the gospel of the righteousness of God in ten of the most glorious verses to be found in Scripture. This morning, I want us to look at this passage in which Paul describes how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the experience of Luther hits home, if you can relate to his tormented quest for peace with God,

⁴ Quoted in Bainton, 49-50. Bainton uses “just” instead of “righteous,” “justice” instead of “righteousness,” and “justly” instead of “righteously,” throughout his quotation.

then I want you to listen closely this morning. Your answer, your hope, will come from Romans 3, not James 2. James is not answering the question you're asking. But Paul is. These four truths have the power to set you free from fear, to set you free from your exhausted attempts to earn God's acceptance and favor, to set you free from a performance-based relationship with God which leaves you always wondering whether you've done enough, whether you've believed enough, whether you've repented enough, and to set you free to rest in the glorious freedom of a righteousness that is by faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, a righteousness which God gives freely as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Righteous Required

The first truth is that righteousness cannot be attained through works of the law. In other words, we lack the righteousness which God requires, and cannot attain this righteousness through self-effort. This is Paul's point in Rom 3:19-20:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin. (3:19-20)

Zero in on the first phrase of v. 20: "for by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight." That is counterintuitive, is it not? When we hear that we are unrighteous and are accountable to God for our sin, isn't our gut reaction to try to make ourselves righteous, to try to do something, anything, to make up for our unrighteousness and to render ourselves acceptable in God's sight? Is this not what most people do when they feel guilty and uncertain of their standing in God's sight? *I'm going to change. I'm going to stop doing those things that make me feel guilty, and I'm going to start doing those things that make me feel better. I'm going to read the Bible more, pray more, go to church more. I will do more, try harder, be better, and then maybe God will accept me.* That is exactly what Luther did. It did not work for Luther, and it will not work for you. No one will be justified – declared righteous in God's sight – by works of the law.

But why? The answer Paul gives in Romans 3 is that the depravity of man is total, complete, comprehensive. We are far too sinful, far too wicked, far too evil to ever attain perfect

righteousness through our works. Rom 3:9-18 is Paul's universal condemnation of mankind... of us. These verses describe our sinful nature, and I would venture to say that unless you have found yourself in these verses, unless you have humbled yourself before God and agreed that what He says in these verses is true of all mankind – is true of you – then you cannot hear the good news as good, for you have never felt the weight of the bad news pressing upon your soul.

*“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands; no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good, not even one. (3:10-12)*

The truth of the matter is that we are unrighteous to the core; we are corrupt through and through. Jesus said that we are bad trees, and bad trees cannot produce good fruit (Mt 7:17-18). Unrighteous people cannot produce righteousness, certainly not the perfect righteousness which God requires of all who would enter into His eternal presence. No amount of works, no amount of effort, no amount of reform could ever produce true righteousness, for all of our best efforts, all of our righteous works, are corrupted and stained by our sinful natures. The way of works, the way of effort, the way of reform, is forever closed to sinners. We have no righteousness within ourselves. What we need, then, is a righteousness that comes from outside ourselves.

Righteousness Provided

What we need is a righteousness that is not our own, a righteousness that is given to us by God. Luther, who wrote in Latin, called this a righteousness *extra nos* – outside of us, alien to us. It is this *righteousness extra nos*, this *alien righteousness*, which we find bursting forth from of the text beginning at v. 21:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift... (3:21-24)

Let's break this apart phrase by phrase...

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law. Paul is saying the same thing he said in Rom 1:17, that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. And this righteousness is "apart from the law." In other words, this righteousness does not come by effort, by works, by obedience, by trying harder, by doing more, by being better. It is a righteousness which comes *from God*. It is a righteousness that is not our own, a righteousness that is *extra nos* – outside of us, alien to us. It is a righteousness that is given to the unrighteous freely as a gift.

Although the Law and Prophets bear witness to it. This is not some idea that Paul invented. This righteousness *extra nos* is witnessed throughout the Scriptures. It is this righteousness *extra nos* which is pictured in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve fell, and the shame of their nakedness was revealed, God covered their shame with garments of His own making, garments of skin, garments procured through the shedding of blood. It is this righteousness *extra nos* which is pictured in Zechariah 3, when Joshua the high priest appeared before God in filthy garments, with Satan standing ready to accuse him. God rebuked Satan and commanded that Joshua's filthy garments be removed and that he be clothed in clean robes, for his iniquity had been taken away. It is this righteousness *extra nos* which is pictured in Revelation 7, when the redeemed of every tribe, of every tongue, of every nation, of every age are gathered around the throne of God, and they are all clothed in white robes washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. It is this righteousness *extra nos* of which Paul spoke in Philippians 3 when he says that he counts all things as loss in order that he may gain Christ,

and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Phil 3:9)

This gospel of imputed righteousness, of righteousness *extra nos*, is found everywhere, from Genesis to Revelation.

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. It is not a righteousness which is earned through obedience and works, but is received as a gift through faith. It is not a righteousness that is accomplished; it is a righteousness that is received.

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift. There is that word justified again. “Justified” (δικαιούμενοι) has the same root as the word “righteous” (δικαίος), which gives us a hint as to its meaning. It means “to declare righteous.” Notice that it is in the passive voice, meaning that we are not the subjects of this justification, but rather its objects. We *are justified* by God; we do not justify ourselves. And notice who it is that are justified – it is sinners who have fallen short of God’s glory. Justification is the sovereign declaration of God that unrighteous sinners are righteous, not because they actually are, or will one day be, but because a true righteousness, a righteousness *extra nos*, the perfect righteousness of Christ, has been given to them as a gift, by grace alone, received through faith alone.

Righteousness Fulfilled

But how can God do this? How can a God who is righteous declare unrighteous sinners to be righteous? What about His justice? What about His righteousness? What about His law? What about His glory? This is a huge problem, much bigger than many of us realize, and the gospel was designed primarily to resolve this problem.

Let me illustrate this with a story with which you are all familiar.⁵ Do you remember the story of David and Bathsheba? David, the king of Israel, the man after God’s own heart, was taking a walk up on the roof of his palace one spring evening, when he should have been leading his armies into battle. From his vantage point, he saw a woman bathing. She was beautiful, and he wanted her; and since he was the king, he took her. When she turned up pregnant, David conspired to have her husband, Uriah, returned from the front lines in order to cover up his affair. When that plan failed, David had Uriah killed. God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David with his sin. And when Nathan laid David’s sin before him, David confessed, saying, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Then, Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Sm 12:13).

What?! David has violated God’s Word, belittled God’s glory, and broken just about every commandment God gave to man. It is God who declared,

⁵ The following illustration is borrowed from John Piper, “God Vindicated His Righteousness in the Death of Christ,” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-vindicated-his-righteousness-in-the-death-of-christ>.

The soul that sins shall die. (Ezk 18:4)

The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23)

“Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” (Gal 3:10)

God is the one who established this irrevocable penalty of death and hell for sin. God is the one who pronounced the everlasting curse of His wrath for the transgression of even the least of His commandments. And then He turns around that tells David that his sin is taken away, that he shall not die?!

Do you see the problem? If God does not kill David and place him under the curse of His wrath, then God will be found a liar. God will be declaring to David, and to everyone who witnessed David's sin, that His Word is not that important enough to uphold, that His glory is not that precious enough to vindicate. If God passes over David's sin, and does not require death and carry out the sentence of divine justice, then God will be unrighteous. Do you see the problem? God cannot pass over your sin, or my sin, leaving the demands of justice, the demands of righteousness, unsatisfied, without Himself becoming unrighteous.

The gospel was designed to solve this problem, and it does so with unfathomable wisdom and unspeakable glory. Let's pick back up at v. 24:

... and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (3:24-26)

How can God justify the ungodly without become ungodly Himself? How can God declare the unrighteous to be righteous without forfeiting His own righteousness? The answer is, *“through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”*

Thus we come to the cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross, Jesus Christ made propitiation in His blood, thereby demonstrating the righteousness of God. Two questions we must answer are these: what is propitiation, and how does propitiation demonstrate the righteousness of God?

Propitiation (ἱλαστήριον) refers to a wrath-absorbing, justice-satisfying sacrifice of atonement. Sadly, and to the great detriment and deprivation of the church, the wrath of God is often overlooked, if not outright denied. But the true gospel of Jesus Christ, the only gospel that saves, must affirm that God possesses a fierce and righteous wrath toward sin *and* toward sinners, because at the very center, at the very core of this gospel is the propitiatory, wrath-absorbing sacrifice of Jesus Christ. You cannot understand the cross apart from a robust understanding of God's wrath, nor can you comprehend hell without the comprehension of the same. Wrath is God's righteous response to sin. The wrath of God is the reason why Christ's death on the cross was necessary. At the cross, God brought Jesus Christ into judgment in our place, charged Him with our sins, found Him guilty for our transgressions, and poured out His fierce wrath against our sin upon the spotless Lamb of God. At the cross, Jesus bore every sin of every one of His people, absorbed the curse of God's wrath in our place, and died the death we deserved. And by His bloody, atoning death on the cross, Jesus Christ satisfied the demands of God's righteousness, the demands of God's justice, on behalf of all who ever had, or ever will, believe.

"This was to demonstrate His righteousness..." How does the wrath-absorbing death of Jesus demonstrate the righteousness of God? Because propitiation is the answer to the problem of God's passing over the sins of David. Propitiation is the answer to the problem of God's passing over the sins of every one of us. By putting His Son to death in our place, by executing the just penalty of the law upon Christ, God demonstrated that His Word *will not* be broken and His glory *will not* be despised. It is righteous and holy and good that God punish every transgression and bring every sin into judgment. It is unrighteous, unholy, and wicked to let sin go unpunished. And God would not, indeed God *cannot* sacrifice His own righteousness in order to show mercy and grace toward sinners. And so, unwilling to sacrifice His righteousness, yet desiring to show mercy to sinners, what did He do? God sacrificed His righteous Son in our place, in order to demonstrate His righteousness, and enable Him to be both just (in the punishment of sin) and the justifier of the sinner who has faith in Jesus.

Righteousness Received

There remains one truth to explore, and that is the question of how the righteousness of God, this righteousness *extra nos*, is received. What we find in the gospel is that the righteousness of God is freely given by grace alone, and freely received by faith alone apart from works. Look back at v. 24. A sinner is

justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (3:24)

We already read in v. 20 that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight,” and now we read that justification comes “freely by His grace.” The righteousness of God cannot be earned, cannot be worked for, cannot be merited. It is only given as an act of God’s free, unmerited, sovereign grace.

The apostle Paul expands upon the graciousness of this gift of righteousness in the next chapter. Look over at Rom 4:4-5:

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (4:4-5)

Paul establishes two ways by which people try to attain the righteousness of God. The first is by works, by effort, by putting in your time, by doing what is required. But if you try to work for God, if you try to work for His righteousness, then what you receive is not grace (a gift), but rather a wage. You are hired hand of God, a slave. The other way is the way of faith. It is simply believing that God is unspeakably gracious and justifies ungodly sinners like us through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. In this way, you are an heir of God, a son. Notice the way Paul sets the two ways in opposition to one another – works and wages vs. faith and grace; hired hands and slaves vs. heirs and sons.

But only one way ends in justification, with the crediting of righteousness, with a judgment of acquittal, and it is not the way of works and wages. It is the way of faith and grace. God does not want hired hands to pay; He wants heirs to bless. God does not want slaves; God wants sons and daughters. God gives the gift of His righteousness freely, by His grace alone,

received by faith alone, or He does not give it at all. God will be beholden to no one. God will be in no man's debt. The giver gets the glory, and God is zealous for His glory. He will allow none to boast in His presence.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (3:27-28)

Do not come to God with your timesheet of works, of effort, of morality, of church attendance, of striving to be good enough, demanding to be repaid for your labors. Come to God empty-handed, bankrupt, destitute, and desperate, and receive freely of His grace a righteousness which cannot be bought, which cannot be earned, and therefore, can never be lost.

Justified by a Faith that Works

James believed every word I just said. I will show you next week that James is addressing a different person, answering a different question, and using "justification" in a different way than is Paul. James is addressing those in the churches who heard Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone and perverted it into a license to sin, an excuse to neglect the royal law with its demands of mercy and sacrifice. Paul is addressing Luther. James is answering the question, "How is true faith demonstrated?" Paul is answering the question, "How can I be accepted in the sight of God?" Luther was not overly fond of James. He called it "an epistle of straw" and afforded it something of a secondary status among the NT books.⁶ One wishes someone had said, "*Nein, Martin. Stille.* James is not talking to you." Luther did not need to be told that the law of Christ placed an absolute demand upon his faith; Luther would have given everything to Christ if it would have soothed his guilty conscience and brought peace to his tormented soul. Luther needed a different word; he needed a gospel. He needed to hear that the righteousness God requires, God gives... freely... by sheer grace and received by mere faith. Luther needed only to rest His trembling soul on the blood and righteousness of Christ that perfectly satisfied the demands of the law in his place.

⁶ Moo, 1.

And so do you, if you find yourself this morning in Luther's condition. I will pick up James' hammer next week, and with it attempt what James attempted with that passage – to shatter the hard heart of nominal Christian. This morning, I speak to the exhausted, to the tormented, to the fearful and the trembling. There is nothing you could ever do to accomplish the righteousness God requires. But you do not have to. The righteousness God requires, God gives freely. You do not have to satisfy the righteous demands of the law because Christ already has as your covenant representative. So cease your striving and rest in the finished work of Christ.