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James #9

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Are We Justified by Faith or by Works? Yes!

James 2:14-26

There simply is no more eternally important question that any man or woman can ask and then answer than this: ***“How might I, a hell-deserving sinner, be reconciled to God and made acceptable in his sight?”*** Or we might pose the question in yet another way: “How might I, a man/woman who is undeniably unrighteous and thus deserving of eternal judgment, be made righteous in the sight of God?” Other questions might feel more pressing or more practical, but rest assured that nothing else in all of life matters much in comparison with the issue of how we can be made right with God and thus assured of eternal life in his presence.

To put it another way, what is it that commends us to God? On what grounds or for what reason does God receive us as his children and look on us with a smile of approval and joy?

You and I will make numerous colossally stupid decisions during our years on earth. But we will, in the end, survive them all. None of them is quite as devastating as we think. Whether it's choosing the wrong job or purchasing the wrong car or making bad friends, as painful as such choices can be, we will survive them. But the issue before us in James 2 is of an eternally different order. ***The conclusion you draw concerning the meaning of James 2 and how you live your life as a result will bear consequences into eternity.*** Not just for the next few weeks, or even years, but for eternity.

So here's what I propose to do. As difficult and challenging as many have found James 2 to be, I want to make an effort to simplify it. I think in doing so we can resolve any problems that we might have with this passage.

The reason people struggle with this text is because they envision the apostle Paul and James standing toe to toe, nose touching nose, glaring into each other's eyes, doing all they can to refute and overturn the other's view. After all, when we put their respective statements on

justification side by side they appear to be contradictory and mutually exclusive. You can't affirm one view without denying and rejecting the other. Or so it seems.

Paul says this:

“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his [God's] sight” (Rom. 3:20a).

Again he says:

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

One more time, Paul declares:

“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Jesus Christ, 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).

I can't imagine anyone stating a position with any greater clarity. But then along comes James who says:

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (James 2:14).

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?” (James 2:21).

“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24).

We at Bridgeway believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, which means that we believe all the truth that it teaches is harmonious and unified and never contradictory. So what are we to make of these texts? And if our eternal salvation hangs suspended on our answer to the question: How is a person justified or declared righteous in the sight of God? how can we have any confidence in our relationship with God when two of the authors of the inspired and inerrant biblical text appear to assert utterly opposite things concerning this matter?

The answer really is easier and simpler than you think. We must begin with the recognition that Paul and James are not arguing against each other. They are not waging theological war with one another. ***They are not to be thought of as standing face to face but rather as standing back to back.*** Neither of them disagrees with the other. The reason people stumble here is they think Paul and James are fighting against each other when in fact ***they are each fighting against different theological opponents.***

Now, who are these opponents? Let's take Paul first. We will call Paul's opponent ***Larry the Legalist.*** What is a legalist? Well, in this case it is a person who believes that acceptance with God, being in the right with God, is dependent on doing works of religious obedience. Good deeds save us. I call him a "legalist" because he loves all things legal or relating to the Law of God. Do the works of the law and you will be saved.

This is the person whom Paul confronts and engages in theological debate. Paul stands face-to-face and nose-to-nose with this person and says without qualification that "by works of the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:16).

Justification is another important word that we need to understand. To be "justified" means that God has declared you to be forgiven of your sins and acceptable in his sight because through your faith he has imputed or reckoned to you the righteousness of Jesus Christ. To be justified means that you are in the right with God. He sees not your sin but the goodness and righteousness of Jesus. Paul said in Philippians 3:9 that he wants to be "found" in Christ, "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).

Larry the Legalist argues that we must have a righteousness to be accepted by God and it comes through our own efforts in seeking to obey God's law. To this Paul says No, we are justified not by works of the law but by faith alone in Christ alone.

James also confronts a theological enemy. We'll call him *Arthur the Antinomian*. You may not be familiar with the word "antinomian" so let me define it. It comes from two words that mean "against the law." Arthur is the sort of person who says, "Well, if I'm justified by faith alone, as Paul says, it doesn't matter how I live my life. I can sin all I want. I don't need to worry at all about obeying God's will. He has accepted me on the grounds of my faith in Christ. So I'll ignore the law of God, I'll play fast and loose with his commandments, I don't have to worry about good works at all."

That is the person whom James confronts. James stands back to back with Paul but face to face with Arthur the Antinomian. And he says to him: "Sir, you are horribly misinformed. Whereas it is true that we are justified by faith alone, we are not justified by the faith which is alone. That is to say, *the faith that alone justifies or makes us acceptable in God's sight is the sort or kind of faith that then will work and obey and happily do the things that God has commanded.*"

By the way, the apostle Paul had to deal with Arthur the Antinomian also. When people heard Paul emphasize justification by faith alone they concluded that they were free to sin all the more. You may recall that Paul said "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). In other words, when sin is seen as really bad, grace is seen as really good. Some people heard this and said in response: "Well, if grace abounds and is seen as such a glorious thing wherever sin exists, then why don't we sin all the more so that grace might abound all the more?"

No, says Paul. Actually, he says it a bit stronger than that. In Romans 6:1 we read this: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! [God forbid! For heaven's sake, No, no, no!]. How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:1-2). So you can see from this that some people distorted Paul's message of justification by faith alone and thought that it meant we didn't need to worry about living a righteous life in obedience to God's revealed will.

But let's not get diverted. The major point I want you to understand is that Paul and James are not fighting each other. *Paul is fighting Larry the Legalist who thinks that doing good deeds and good works is the basis or foundation of our acceptance with God. James is fighting Arthur the Antinomian who thinks that good works have no place at all in the Christian life. Since we are justified by faith alone we need not worry about practical obedience.*

Thus when we realize who the opponents are we see that Paul and James are on the same side. They are simply arguing against different distortions of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Both men

agree that justification is by faith alone. But both also agree that *the faith that alone justifies is not a faith that is alone*. It is a faith that obeys.

Not all "Faith" is Saving Faith

As you can see from what I just said, I believe the key to understanding James is not only found in the recognition that he and Paul are arguing against different theological opponents but also in the recognition that they are talking about *two different kinds of so-called "faith"*.

Let me illustrate my point, or better yet, the point that James is trying to make. I have in my hand two small objects, both of which I claim are seeds. If you were to take them in your hand you probably couldn't tell any difference between the two. They weigh the same, smell the same, feel the same, and look the same. But only one of them is truly a seed. The other is a pebble, a lifeless, inert piece of matter that looks a lot like a seed and could for a time pass as a seed. But merely *claiming* to be a seed doesn't make it one. Mere *saying* it is a seed doesn't transform its nature. I might insist that this object is a seed and in time will bring forth plant life of some sort. But it won't.

So how do you know which one is the seed and which is the pebble? You plant them in the ground and water them and make sure that they receive plentiful sunlight. The seed will eventually grow and produce a plant or fruit or perhaps a flower. The pebble will lie lifeless in the ground and produce nothing. Ah, you say, now I know which one is the seed. I draw my conclusion based on the fruit it produces. I know the other object was a lifeless pebble, no matter how loudly someone insists it is really a seed. And I know this because it produces nothing.

This is what James is saying about the nature of that faith which alone brings us justification in the sight of God. And Paul would say it as well. Some people have a religious experience and call it faith. Some people are raised in church all their life and refer to their Sunday routine as faith. Some people sign a decision card or even get baptized and point to each and call it faith.

But James says that *if this thing you call "faith" doesn't produce works of obedience, it's probably a pebble*. Real faith, the sort of faith that justifies and saves and reconciles us to God, is like a seed when planted and watered: it produces fruit; it produces a life in which one's heart loves the things of God and desires to walk in obedience to the revealed will of God. It doesn't produce perfection, but it does result in passion for God and a pursuit of holiness.

The point James and Paul are making is that not everything that calls itself faith or passes itself off as faith is the sort of “faith” that justifies and saves. Some so-called experiences of “faith” are nothing more than *intellectual assent*. By this I mean you agree in your mind with the truth of some claim or some event. Other experiences that people call “faith” are nothing more than *emotionally charged reactions to a moment of religious euphoria*. Perhaps you attended our worship night this past Friday and you were deeply moved by the music, you were swept up in the highly charged atmosphere of the evening, you may even have wept and felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. But unless that experience leads to genuine repentance from sin and active, joyful, sincere trust in who Jesus is and what he has done on the cross for sinners, it’s no different from the pebble in my hand. It accomplishes nothing. It saves no one. Not the loudest protests in the world will change that. Not the most vigorous declarations that this person has believed in Jesus will change that pebble into the seed of saving faith.

And the only ultimate test for whether or not this thing you call “faith” is in fact saving, justifying “faith” is what happens when you plant it and water it and make certain that the sun shines upon it. Likewise, the only ultimate test for whether or not this experience of yours is true faith, the faith that Paul says alone can justify the sinner in the sight of God, is whether or not it produces a life of obedience and love for holiness.

So let’s now turn our attention to James and let me walk you through how he makes this point.

First, in vv. 14-17 he labors to demonstrate that a so-called “faith” that does not produce works of obedience and compassion and generosity and kindness is not saving faith. What good is it, he asks, if you *say* you have faith but there are no works? “Can **THAT** faith save him?” (James 2:14b). No, says James. “That” kind of faith is not saving faith and we know it isn’t saving faith because it is not a working faith. As you’ve heard me say countless times, ***faith alone justifies, but not the faith that is alone.*** James isn’t saying that you need works as the *cause* of your justification. He is saying that you need works as the *consequence* of your justification.

Second, in vv. 18-19 he provides yet another line of evidence to make his point. He puts forth a hypothetical discussion between two people. The principle here is the same: How do I know you have faith in the absence of works? If you have no works, if you have no desire to obey Jesus, if you fail to display the fruit of the Holy Spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and so on, how am I supposed to know you really have faith? Do you expect me simply to believe because you say so? Instead, let me demonstrate to you the reality of my faith precisely in the works that I love to do for the sake of God’s glory.

But someone objects: “Wait a minute. I have true beliefs about God, just like you. I affirm that God is one, that there is only one God and not many. Isn’t that good enough to prove that my profession of faith is real and saving?” No, says James, for “*even the demons believe*” that God is one. And they not only believe it, they are terrified by it. They tremble when they think of God. They fear the coming judgment that God will impose on them. But their knowledge of who God is doesn’t change the fact that they are still demons! And your knowledge of who God is doesn’t by itself mean you aren’t still an unbeliever and lost in your sin.

Orthodoxy by itself proves nothing. Is having right beliefs and sound, Scriptural theology important? Absolutely! But merely asserting in your mind and giving intellectual assent to the truth of what the Bible says does not in itself mean you are in good standing with God. Faith certainly involves believing truths about God and sin and Christ and the cross. ***But if you don’t actually and authentically trust and rely upon and cast your hope in who Christ and what he has done, your theology amounts to nothing.*** And the way we can know that you have authentically trusted in, relied upon, and put your hope in Jesus is whether or not this so-called “faith” gradually and incrementally transforms how you live.

Third, James gives two more examples of his point in vv. 20-26. He cites the example of *Abraham* in vv. 20-24 and of *Rahab* in vv. 25-26. This by itself is remarkable. Abraham was a patriarch. Rahab was a prostitute!

Let’s look first at the illustration from the life of Abraham in vv. 20-24. James obviously believes that the experience of Abraham proves his point about the nature of true, saving, justifying faith. And in these verses he points our attention to two events in Abraham’s life. In vv. 21-22 James directs our attention to **Genesis 22**. That is the story of when Abraham, in obedience to God, took Isaac up on the mountain and made preparations to offer him as a sacrifice on the altar.

In v. 23 James directs our attention to something that happened much earlier in Abraham’s life. V. 23 is a reference to **Genesis 15:6** where Abraham is described as having believed God, the result of which “it was counted to him as righteousness.” In other words, Abraham was justified and reckoned righteous in God’s sight in Genesis 15 when he first exercised faith and trust and belief in God’s promise.

But **30 years later** (30 years after God had reckoned Abraham to be righteous through faith alone) God commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice. And Abraham obeyed, or at least until God stopped him and delivered Isaac and provided a lamb for the sacrifice.

Do you see what is going on here? James makes it clear that Abraham was declared righteous in God's sight by faith alone when he believed God's promise in Genesis 15. But 30 years later Abraham was justified by works when he offered up Isaac on the altar. How are we supposed to reconcile these two events? There are three possible answers.

(1) Some argue that here James is using the word "justify" in a sense different from how Paul used it. Paul used the word "justify" to mean that God **declares** a man righteous in his sight at the beginning of his spiritual life or at the moment of his initial conversion. James uses the word "justify" to mean that a man **demonstrates** that he is righteous in God's sight subsequent to his initial conversion. Does the NT ever use the word "justify" in this latter sense of "to demonstrate" or "vindicate" or "publicly prove"? Yes.

We see this in Matthew 11:19 Jesus responds to the accusations of the religious leaders: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." Clearly the word "justified" here means vindicated or publicly shown to be in the right. In other words, "the existence and value of wisdom are demonstrated in the actions that arise from it" (Moo, 135). We see similar uses of "justify" in Luke 10:29; 16:15; 1 Cor. 4:4; 1 Tim. 3:16.

If this is how James is using the word in vv. 21 and 24 the idea would be that whereas Abraham was declared righteous (justified) by God in Genesis 15 through faith alone, his faith was **vindicated** or **publicly proven** (justified) to be real and saving in Genesis 22.

(2) Another possibility is that Paul is referring to our justification that comes when we first exercise faith, when we are first converted. That initial declaration that a man or woman is righteous in God's sight comes through faith alone. James, on the other hand, refers to our **ultimate** justification at the final judgment. When the believer stands before God on judgment day God will once again declare him/her to be righteous in light of the evidence of the good works they have performed throughout the course of his/her life. Works are not the basis of that declaration. Rather, our works are the **evidence** that the declaration made when we first came to faith is true and right and just.

(3) Another possibility is that James speaks this way because good works always follow justifying faith to such a degree that when the works occur we can rightly say that a person is justified by them. Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies always works so that when Abraham obeyed God we can say God justified him. These works of

Abraham “completed” his faith (v. 22b) in the sense that the plant or flower “completes” or fulfills the purpose of the seed.

If Abraham had stubbornly and defiantly refused to obey God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, if he had rebelled and not repented of such, we would know that his “faith” that supposedly justified him back in Genesis 15 was not genuine saving faith. But just as the seed planted and watered brings forth the plant and the flower, so also ***Abraham’s faith in Genesis 15 brings forth the obedience and good works of Genesis 22.***

The obedience of Abraham in Genesis 22 when he was willing to sacrifice his son demonstrated that his “faith was completed by his works” or was made manifest by his works or his works fulfilled his faith and showed it to be genuine. ***Abraham was justified by his works in the sense that his obedience to God’s command proved that his faith, that faith he exercised 30 years earlier as recorded in Genesis 15, was real, genuine, saving faith.***

But wait a minute. How can James appeal to the example of Abraham to make his point? After all, Abraham was hardly typical. He was the father of the Jewish people. He is the man of preeminent goodness and an example to us all. James knows that you might object in this way, so he cites yet another OT person to prove his point: ***Rahab, the prostitute!*** No one would appeal to her as an example of godliness!

We know from Hebrews 11:31 that Rahab exercised faith in God. She turned from her pagan ways and from her immoral lifestyle and embraced in faith Yahweh, the God of Abraham. And how do we know this to be true? What evidence is there that she, like Abraham, was justified in God’s sight? We know it because at great risk to her own physical welfare she provided a way of escape for the Israeli spies who had been sent by Joshua to spy out the city of Jericho.

The Relationship between Faith and Works in the Christian Life

The relationship between faith and works is not an issue for ivory tower theologians but for every man and woman who cares about where they will spend eternity!

The NT is clear: ***Faith alone is the condition of salvation but works are the consequence of it.*** If there are no works, there likely has been no faith. Faith is the root and works are the fruit.

Faith is the cause and works are the consequence. We aren't saved **by** works but we are saved **for** works. Several texts make this clear. We'll look only at four of them.

The first comes from the passage in James 2 immediately preceding ours today:

“For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

James is alluding to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount where he said: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). Jesus appears to suspend our receiving of mercy upon our doing of mercy. How can he do that? Does that not make the receiving of mercy from God dependent on what we do, dependent on our work? Yes. But he can say that because Jesus, like Paul and James, believed that the person who has truly received mercy *will* be merciful to others. The person who has been the object of God's saving mercy and grace and forgiveness will invariably show mercy, grace, and extend forgiveness to others. If there is no mercy in our treatment of others it reveals the sad fact that we don't truly know Christ, and that leads to judgment. But if we've tasted his mercy through faith in Christ we will show mercy in works of compassion and kindness and that mercy is the evidence of our faith. And that mercy will carry us through the judgment.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

Paul clearly affirms that the only thing that counts with God or reckons us acceptable to God is our faith in Jesus Christ. But what “kind” or “sort” of faith does he have in mind? It is the kind of faith that “works through love.” Saving faith is the kind of faith that is of such a nature or quality that it produces love.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

We are set free from the condemnation of our sin through faith and not by anything we do. But don't use that truth to justify living in sin. Faith alone saves you, but if it truly saved you it will work. If you find someone who claims to be a Christian, who claims to have faith in Jesus, but they use that as an excuse or opportunity to indulge in sinful and fleshly behavior, that is not saving faith.

“For by grace you have been saved **through faith**. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10).

Note well that Paul does **not** say we were created in Christ Jesus **because** of good works, but **for** them. Good works are not the cause or the ground of our salvation but its purpose and goal. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But this wonderful saving faith is never alone, but is always accompanied by obedience and the fruit of the Spirit, the very works that God ordained from eternity past that we should walk or live in them.

So I conclude that James is not arguing for works without faith. Rather, he is arguing against faith without works. Or again, James is not saying that saving faith without works is dead but that faith without works is not a saving faith.

To the person who asks, “Is it faith that justifies us, or works?” the apostle Paul replies, “Faith alone justifies, without works.” When that same person asks again, “But does *all* faith justify?” James replies, “No; the faith that is alone, the faith that does not work, does not justify.”