

Faith And Works

James 2:14-26

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 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? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 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. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (James 2:14-26 (ESV))

As we begin today, I am once again reminded just how much these words truly are “Spiritual truths”, and that they are filled with “secret and hidden wisdom” from God. And the only way that we can fathom the depth of their meaning is through the power and the presence of God’s Holy Spirit ministering within us. Listen again to these precious words in 1 Corinthians 2!

12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:12-13 (ESV))

Why do I begin this message in this manner this morning? It’s because, once again, as I have read and reread the words in this passage here in James, God has reminded me, that His ways, His character, His depth of holiness is far, far beyond any rationale and comprehension that my mind can muster.

Here, in clear and precise words, God chooses to bring to our consideration one of the most troubling “apparent contradictions” in the whole of the New Testament, that of the

question of exactly how our souls are able to be saved and spared from the eternal wrath of hell. Simply put, what does it take to save our mortal souls? Is it “faith” or is it “faith and works”?

It is so easy for us to answer this question when we are studying the Book of Romans where the Apostle Paul so clearly and emphatically outlines those doctrines of “sola fide” and “sola Christus”, that tell us that salvation is by “faith alone” in “Christ alone”. And I preached that to you last Sunday and we sang “Nothing But The Blood” of Jesus.

And if you and I have truly surrendered our hearts and minds to Christ, then the Holy Spirit will resoundingly declare to our souls that those truths are absolutely right and true, that our “justification” will only come to us through the shed blood of Christ on the cross.

But then . . . but then, God brings us here to James chapter 2, and He tells us to “stop and take a time out”, “a moment to think”, a moment to “wait upon Him”, that He has one more precious nugget of “secret wisdom” to reveal to us, “wisdom” that tells us that there is more to be understood about His precious gift of salvation, that He, God, is not “one-dimensional”, as so many people would have Him to be, only being the God that we want to make Him up to be and not the God that He really is.

I made mention of this in the last message, that many good and devout believers in God fall victim to the flaw of demanding that God be “one-dimensional”, perhaps only a “God of love” who will figure out some way to save most everybody, even those who reject Him and reject His holiness. But God really, really is not “one-dimensional”. He is a “God of love”, yes, but He is also “holy” and “righteous” and He cannot allow sin of any kind to enter into and abide within His kingdom for all eternity. He must deal with sin and that means “judgment” and “hell”.

And here again, in these words of this passage, God is revealing His “many-dimensional” character. He is saying to us that it is not a contradiction within these scriptures to believe that while our salvation is “through faith alone, in Christ alone”, that “works”, and specifically, “works that manifest love”, also have a place within the justification process that Christ and His Holy Spirit provides to us. And that special place that “works” occupies is not just an “oh yeah, works also”, but rather “works” being an absolute requirement.

Now, with that being said, how can God’s words, His precepts that “seem” so contrary, even contradictory to one another, actually reconcile themselves into being “one complete truth”?

First, a reminder about all of these words, those given in Romans that speak of “salvation through faith”, and now these words given to us by the Apostle James that speak of the necessity of “works”. There is one over-arching truth that brings all of these other truths together into one. It is that every one of these words were “breathed” into the minds of these writers by God Himself. Listen, from 2 Timothy 3,

16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV))

And so, from these words, we can know with a certainty that there really is no contradiction. All of these words are from God and they carefully intertwine to make “one complete truth”.

May we pause for a moment and consider one of those technical words of our Christian faith, the word “Orthodoxy”! Orthodoxy is defined as being the “authorized or generally accepted theory, doctrine, or practice.” As it relates to our Christian faith, “orthodoxy” means our knowing the necessary technical information about our Christian faith, about the Trinity, about creation, about the gospel and Christ’s shed blood on the cross and on and on. And God wants you and me to have our “orthodoxy” solid within our minds and hearts. And many people do, and are able to say all the right words and know the right things to do.

But listen, even though that be true, a problem can arise when, even with all our knowledge and orthodoxy, we still do not correspondingly know what God really intends for these words to mean for each and every person that He is ministering to each day. Not that their meanings may change. God’s word is immutable and unchanging. But though that be true, these words may actually be applied to different individual people and their circumstances in very different manners.

Here in this passage, James most likely had a whole different audience from that of the Apostle Paul, James often ministering to the Jews and Paul ministering to the Gentiles, the Jews being filled with a clear “orthodoxy”, but the Gentiles barely knowing any at all.

And then, we have us today in the modern church, who are, like the Jews, filled with our southern-style “bible-belt orthodoxy”. But is ours a right and clear “orthodoxy”. James is here demanding that we examine our “orthodoxy” to see if it is right and clear and “complete”, containing all the necessary elements for us to be saved and for us to minister our works to others.

And he is especially giving emphasis to the point that from the very first moment of our receiving Christ into our souls for salvation, “works” must occupy an integral part of that Spiritual transaction, that there really is no argument between the two, “faith and works”, but that they are actually compatible and interrelated in their context and purpose. And that you and I are to look for that compatibility as we attempt to fathom the depth of this “hidden wisdom”.

And as we attempt to do that here today, one of the first considerations that occurs to me is that we, you and I, should clearly understand the meaning of this word “works”, as it’s used here in this particular context.

The most common application of this term “works” harkens us back to thoughts of the Old Testament and to the seeming necessity for a person to practice obedience to all the many “works of the law”, the “laws of Moses”, and that obedience being a way to “earn” and to “merit” eternal salvation.

But that understanding does not seem at all to be God’s intended meaning here. Because, just a few verses earlier in this chapter, we read the clear declaration that if we hope to be saved by obedience to the law, we would have to keep every one of those laws perfectly and not break even one of them, that by breaking even one of those laws, we have effectively broken them all, and then we would not be saved.

So then, in this context, the word “works” does not mean that we are required to keep the “Law” or any other form of “works” in order to “earn” or “merit” our salvation. God’s intended meaning seems instead to be focused on “works” that are shown through “acts of love”. We can see that in verses 15-17,

15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 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? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:15-17 (ESV))

These words describe a kind of faith that has within it an essential element of vibrant love, love that is clearly and easily “worked out” in the behavior that we show towards other people, here, seeing a person in need of food and clothing and quickly giving them the things they need. And these works are spoken about in several other portions of scripture as being “works of love”.

And Jesus described the very essence of being a Christian, in John 13, when He said

34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35 (NASB))

So then, "works of love" truly are an essential part of our faith. And it's clear that here in the use of the word "works", the Holy Spirit is not instructing us to fall back onto dependence upon fulfillment of some form of "works of the law" in order to "earn" or to "merit" our justification and salvation. He is rather speaking of "works of love" wherein our faith is "made evident" by our "works," by our feeding and clothing the poor, and our taking care of widows and orphans. And James repeats his words in verse 24, saying,
24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.
(James 2:24(ESV))

So then, certain kinds of "works" are not just important, they are actually an essential element of our salvation. But how! How do "works" become an essential part of the "justification" that is already perfectly provided for by the shed blood of Jesus.

Again, as we carefully think through this tightly knit doctrine about "faith and works", let's always keep in mind the exact truths that are given in these scriptures, that our "Justification is by faith alone" and cannot be earned by our "good works". Those words are given plainly in Romans 1:16-17 which tell us that

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

And Ephesians 2:8-9,

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV))

So then, how do these words telling us that our salvation comes through faith alone fit with James 2:24?"

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

First, may I confess to you that all of this is far beyond the wisdom that God has imparted to me thus far. But I will give you the small amount that He has given to me for today.

Secondly, may we consider that perhaps the two, “faith” and “works of love”, though according to these precepts of James, occur in a simultaneous manner at the very moment of our justification and salvation, are more aptly described as an instantaneous intermingling of “cause” and “effect” and “evidence”.

From the words of Ephesians 2:8-9 we know that the gift of our salvation is a “complete” gift. It is a gift of salvation and it is a gift of the faith that it takes for us to believe and to receive His gift of salvation.

But here also, James seems to be saying that the gift of faith is more “complete” than just our being able to believe and to receive our salvation. It is also a “Spirit of love” that enables us to “love others” and to show that love with “works of love”. And that our salvation will be “evidenced” not only by our new-found belief in Christ, but also by a new-found ability to love, to love God Himself and to love other people. And our new-found love for other people will be clearly seen and worked out in our daily behaviors toward them, in our “works of love”.

One final question . . . why did God have James come along, nearly at the very end of this bible and bring this matter of “works of love” to the forefront of our thinking? It is probably because as we look at ourselves and at the other people around us who claim to be Christians, evidence, real evidence of salvation cannot be seen very clearly. And God wants each of us to know that there really is a clear and visible “evidence” of our salvation right within our daily behavior. Do we now have a “Godly love” for the people around us, a “Godly love” that works its way out in our moment by moment behavior.

And James is saying clearly and plainly that yes, we really may have “faith”, at least some form of faith, but is it the kind of “faith” that will gain us salvation. The one sure way of our knowing if we are really saved is to observe our own behavior. Is our faith being worked out in the way we love one another. If it is not, then our faith may be “dead”, really “dead”, and “useless”.

So, the question for you and me today is, “Do we have a vibrant faith, a faith that is alive and plainly working its way out in “works of love”. Is the evidence plain both to our own selves and to others around us? It must be! It must!

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?

17 faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:14, 17 (ESV))