

Faith That Works Part 4

20 . . . do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*" And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:20-26)

May I begin the message today with a forewarning that my words will seem to continue to be repetitive concerning this matter of "faith", and they are. That's because, the Apostle James is also very repetitive with his words regarding this matter of "faith". I believe that God chose for him to be repetitive because of ongoing arguments that were being voiced in some of the churches he was pastoring concerning just how the exercise of "faith" was to fit into daily church life.

And those and other similar arguments and debates have continued to roil within the Christian church throughout all the days since God first brought the church into being, arguments and debates that often were born out from very earnest intentions and efforts by men as they sought to know God and to know His plan for their lives. And it has been though some of those arguments and debates that several of our modern-day church denominations have been formed.

And such was the circumstance that generated one of the most hard-fought controversies in all of church history, and that controversy is still being fought today. And it involved this very matter that is before us here in these words of the Apostle James. The question being debated was, and is, "How does the salvation of a person's soul actually take place? Are we saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, or must we also have the added requirement of 'good works' in order to be saved"?

In several passages, especially in the Book of Romans, the Apostle Paul gave God's very definitive answer to that question, declaring that "Salvation truly is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone", with no additional requirement of "works" on our part in order to gain our salvation. And in Romans chapter 4, God used this very same man, Abraham, and Abraham's circumstance as evidence of that truth.

But then, as many of our early church leaders read passages such as these here in the Book of James, they adopted alternative views as to what God intended. That was especially so with the Roman Catholic Church. And because of that, Roman Catholic Church doctrines, even today, declare that "Yes, Salvation is by grace, through faith in Christ, but also, with certain "works of righteousness" being absolutely required before salvation can take place.

And that Roman Catholic version of salvation was the standard of the Christian Church until the sixteenth century, when a Catholic monk, named Martin Luther, while studying the Book of Romans, and specifically Romans 1:17, suddenly realized from those words that salvation does not come as a result of the works people do, but instead, salvation comes solely "by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone", without the added need for a person's works. Those words in Romans 1,

¹⁷ For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "*The just shall live by faith.*" (Romans 1:17)

As Luther began to voice this newly discovered truth, "The righteous shall live by faith", other church leaders began to agree with him. And from there, the "Protestant Reformation" began and the Protestant church that we are a part of today, was birthed out from and separated out from the Roman Catholic Church.

Yes, some variations have been developed over time by other Bible Scholars, such as Calvinism and Arminianism, but the basic doctrine of "Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone", with no additional requirement of "works" on our part in order to gain our salvation is still the standard of the Protestant Churches.

But with that being said, there are still many within our Christian churches who read these words of the Apostle James and can be confused. Here, the

Apostle's words seem to imply that "works" really do have their place within the whole matter of salvation. And you and I can readily agree that they do, they really do! "Works of Righteousness" really do have their place within a Christian's soul!

But we must be very careful as we "rightly divide this word of truth" to rightly determine the "right place" that "works" should occupy within God's plan. As in this passage, we can clearly see that the "works" that "justify" Abraham's salvation, specifically the offering up of his son, Isaac, took place well after the time that it is said of him that "Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness". It was faith first, and then the "works". Listen, in verse 21 of today's passage . . .

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? (James 2:21-22)

May I back up for a moment and say again that the confusion about "works" that developed within the Catholic Church had its origins within passages of scripture just like the one before us today. And very honestly, if a person used only these words and their human understanding to develop their beliefs, then it is no wonder that they went astray regarding this matter of "works".

And such seemed to be the case that took place even during the days of the Apostle James as he pastored some of the churches that had formed after the Jews were dispersed from Jerusalem into other lands.

From these words, it seems clear that some people within those newly formed churches had developed a belief that God's "Grace" alone was sufficient for salvation, but that "doing works of righteousness" was in some way contrary to "grace", and so much so that "works" were not only unnecessary but might even be sinful.

Their confusion in their beliefs could possibly have come through a misunderstanding of some of the teachings and writings of the other apostles at the time, especially the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter, who taught and emphasized the doctrine of "Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone", with no additional requirement of "works" in order to gain salvation. And yes, that doctrine was absolutely right in every way, but

that doctrine was intended to be specific to the events and time leading up to a person's salvation and not the events that followed salvation.

And here again, if a person used only Peter and Paul's words and their own human understanding to develop their beliefs, then it is no wonder that their beliefs went astray regarding this matter of "works". That is why it is so important to study these scriptures "line upon line", "precept upon precept", each scripture proving out another scripture.

And a careful reading of these words of James regarding "works" will clearly reveal that God is not speaking about events and requirements that lead up to a person's salvation, but rather He is describing the response that a person will have as they begin to "live out" and "work out" their new-found "gift of faith" that they received as a result of salvation.

Here, God is telling us that our salvation is only the entranceway into a life-long relationship with Christ. And that our salvation will then be proven out by, "justified by" the "good works" that will begin to take place in us through the changes that our saving "faith" has wrought within our souls, changes in our daily habits and behaviors, changes that are evidenced by our "good works".

As we have been saying in these messages over the past few weeks, in our new birth, our whole being really is changed, radically changed, completely and eternally changed. And that change will surely be seen in everything that follows our rebirth. God tells us plainly in the words in 2 Corinthians 5:17, words that I have shared with you several times recently, that everything we think and say and do is now new, completely new, our "old man" is dead, a "new man" (or woman) has been born within us.

17 Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Yes, it is a strange experience, a mystery, but it is true! And this is what James keeps telling us over and over again in these words, that once our souls have been "born again" through the blessed "propitiation" that Christ made for us on the cross, as believers, our newly formed "faith" and "salvation" will surely then be evidenced by changes that will take place within our soul and within our daily behaviors, by our "works".

That evidence is part of what God intended with the definition of “faith” that He gave to us. Recall those words in Hebrews 11:1 where He said!

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

The “evidence” spoken about in these words is the “outward” manifestation of the invisible inward changes that took place within our soul as we were saved.

But again, as we spoke about in an earlier message, we unfortunately don't come into our relationship with Christ “fully surrendered” to Him and to His truths. And to add to that difficulty, we don't come fully equipped with biblical knowledge.

And such seemed to be what took place that prompted James to write these words here in James chapter 2. Here, James seems to be correcting some errors in thinking by clarifying that yes, “salvation is by grace through faith alone”. But once a person is saved, they then have “righteous works” that are required of them. And further, that if a person, if you and I, fail to know and to do those works, then our faith is as good as “dead”, and possibly, if examined carefully, is not even real “saving faith” at all.

As I mentioned earlier, I know that these words today are repetitive, but it seems necessary to make very sure that these words of the Apostle James are not misunderstood as they have been in the past. Here, James is telling us that our salvation does not end at the “doorway into our eternity”. It only begins there! After the “blood of Christ” has been applied to our sins, and the blessed Holy Spirit has sealed our salvation, it is then that the next steps of our salvation begin, and those steps continue to go on all the way into eternity.

As we learned from Philippians 2, we must now

12 . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

Again, yes, our “new birth” did take place at one moment in time, but as these words tell us, our salvation also clearly does have a continuing element to it. We are to continue with our salvation by working it out as God's Spirit works within us to carry forward His plans and His purposes. And that working out of our salvation with fear and trembling is part of what James is revealing to us here in the context of His words. He is saying to us . . . verse 20,

20 . . . do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*" And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:20-26)

Again, to be clear may I repeat myself, the “works” that James is speaking about here, are not “prerequisite requirements in order to get saved” but are instead “requirements necessary after our salvation”. And our doing of them is evidence to us and to everyone around us that our salvation experience is real and is effectual. As he tells us here, our “faith” is made “perfect” by our works.

Folks, we here in this church, might not understand how these words can get confused and misunderstood, but such is taking place in some of the most prominent of our evangelical churches today. I spoke about this at length in an earlier message, but I'd like to mention it again for this context.

There is a doctrine that is being preached in some of our Christian Churches that insists that once a person has uttered those few words that we call “the believer's prayer”, and after they have undergone a “believer's baptism”, then no matter their future behavior, though it be abhorrent and life-long habitually sinful, that person is still surely “saved”, and no one should question their salvation. That errant person is simply accepted as being a “carnal Christian”, a “carnal Christian”.

And those who hold to such beliefs, rely primarily upon such scripture texts as we studied last week in the Book of Romans where, in chapter 7, the Apostle Paul refers to himself as being “carnal”. And Paul went on to great extents within that passage to reveal a constant struggle with sin that was being waged within his soul between his “flesh” and his “spirit”.

And yes, such struggles do surely take place within each of our souls. Remnants of our old habits and desires and affinities still remain within us, and “sin” really does seek to win back our souls. But may I say to us, that the struggle experienced by the Apostle Paul was clear evidence that He really was truly saved. The Holy Spirit within him waged a constant battle on his behalf against his fleshy desires, thus proving his salvation. But folks, a so-called “carnal Christian” does not have that same battle taking place within his or her soul, else they would eventually turn and repent.

Without my fully joining into that controversy, may I simply say that I agree with these words of scripture that we are examining here today. The Holy Spirit within us calls us into absolute surrender to Christ, not only as our “Savior”, but also as our “Lord”. And that while our salvation is “by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone”, our surrender to Christ as “Lord” is essential as clear evidence that true salvation actually did take place within our souls. And further, as the Apostle James is declaring here, our “works” will be the testimony that authenticates our salvation.

Here, through the words of the Apostle James, God is telling us that if “grace” has done its effectual work within our souls and we are truly saved, then our “works”, our behaviors and our habits will testify to the authenticity of it.

We’ll close for now, and as we do, listen to these words carefully. This is the essential message that the Apostle James is conveying to us here in our text today. Listen! First, beginning in verse 20 . . .

20 . . . do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? (James 2:21-22)

And then finally in verse 26,

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:26)

