

Faith and Works

James 2:14-26

“For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” That in a nutshell, is the great doctrine of justification by faith, which formed the foundation of Paul’s theology, and Augustine’s, and Luther’s and Calvin’s. It was the essential creed of the Protestant Reformation – that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

So, how are we to square all of this with what James says in verse 24: “By works a man is justified and not by faith only?” Are the unbelievers right – is this an example of how the Bible is completely inconsistent?

Well, in the first place, let’s take another look at our responsive reading from Ephesians. We all know verses 8 and 9: “For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” But what comes immediately after this ringing declaration of justification by faith? “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” In short, Paul teaches that we are saved by faith, but also that we are saved for good works, in order that we might do the will of God in our lives. Good works, in other words, necessarily flow out of true faith.

And this is the same point that James is making: that those who claim to have faith but at the same time fail to demonstrate the reality of that faith through their works are actually just kidding themselves. Those whose outward lives are not changed by the gospel cannot be said to have really believed the gospel at all.

For what, at root, is faith? What does it mean to believe? We might want to start, for example, with the Apostles’ Creed, which lists a number of statements about God that we Christians hold to be true. We believe, for example, that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and that He suffered under Pontius Pilate. We believe that He died and rose again from the dead on the third day. These are all facts that we believe really happened.

And it is important, it is critical that our faith includes embracing all these facts, indeed all the facts of the Bible. For if we do not, if we allow ourselves to be seduced by the uncertainty and relativism of this present age, if we decide to compromise, if we yield to the dictates of reason or experience, throwing off as old-fashioned or primitive certain Biblical facts, we will soon find ourselves questioning the essential doctrines of the faith.

But as James points out, if assenting to the truth of Biblical facts is the foundation and the fuel for our faith, faith must go far beyond this starting point. For however important all these facts and events may be, James reminds us in verse 19 that the demons also believe all of them to be true. In fact, since they are spiritual beings, it is very likely that they were alive when all the events of Jesus’ life happened. Demons even confessed Jesus to be the Son of God when He cast them out of their victims, but we would never say that they have faith.

So, if faith is more than just believing certain things to be true about God, then what is faith? To understand this, James draws our attention to the life and example of Abraham, whose faith in God

wasn't simply focused on the truth of historical events, but also on confidence that God would keep His promises in the future.

For example, in verse 23, James reminds us of the events of Genesis chapter 15. Abram was over 75 years old at the time, but he and his wife Sarai had had no children. Nevertheless, God spoke to Abram and said that he would have more descendants than there were stars that he could see in the sky. It was this seemingly impossible promise that verse 23 says Abram believed, and as a result, God reckoned, God considered Him to be righteous.

Okay, so is faith just trusting that God will keep His promises? Well, it certainly includes that, just as it includes holding certain facts about Jesus to be true. And maybe that's as far as your faith goes. Maybe you believe what the Bible says about Jesus. Maybe you believe that He died for the sins of the world in the past and that He will also save you in the future. And maybe you even believe that He's going to come again and straighten out the sinful mess that we have made of God's world.

And all that's true, and all that's important. But the sort of faith James has in mind goes deeper still, just as Abraham's faith in God wasn't just a vague notion that God would someday keep His word. No, in the greatest test Abraham ever faced, we find what his faith was made of. We find out what true faith really means.

For God did keep the promise He made to Abraham. After 25 years of waiting, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was ninety, Isaac was born to them. But after a few years, God did the unthinkable. Genesis chapter 22 records how God asked Abraham to offer Isaac up as a sacrifice to him. No, it didn't make any more sense to Abraham than it does to us. Not only would such a sacrifice negate everything God had promised, the very idea of human sacrifice went against everything Abraham thought was holy and right. And make no mistake – by killing Isaac, Abraham would also be putting to death his fondest wish, his hopes for a son to inherit his property and carry on his name. And yet, Abraham was willing to go through with it, Abraham was willing to offer up Isaac, because of his faith in God.

And that, James tells us, is the true test of faith. For faith isn't just believing that God said certain things or did certain things in the past. And faith isn't just believing that God's going to do certain things in the future. No, faith is trusting God completely today. And the ultimate test of that faith is thus our obedience to God today, even if that obedience flies in the face of all our reason and all our experience.

Now, God didn't ultimately make Abraham go through with the sacrifice of Isaac – instead He provided a ram that was caught by its horns in a bush. And God isn't asking any of us to kill any of our children. But what if He called one of your children into the ministry, or into a foreign mission field? How would you feel about that? Or what if He called you to do what Abraham did, to leave your home and extended family, everything that you had ever known? What if He called you to give up some of your comfort, some of your standard of living, or some of your time so that others may come to know the gospel?

Or what if, like some of those students at Columbine High School, or all too many of our Christian brothers and sisters in Syria and Iraq, He called you to confess your faith in Him at the risk of your own life? For when you get right down to it, that's what Rahab did. James mentions her in verse

25, but you may remember the rest of the story from Joshua chapter 2. There we learn that two Israelites were sent to spy out part of the promised land. They snuck in to the city of Jericho, and spent the night in the house of Rahab, a prostitute. Somehow, their cover was blown, and the king of Jericho found out not only that they were Israelite spies, but also where they were hiding.

Now, it would have been very easy for Rahab to surrender the two spies to the king of Jericho. It would have been the safe thing to do, the practical thing to do. But she decided to protect them. She took them up on the roof and hid them in some stalks of flax she had probably left up there to dry in the sun. Then, she told the king's messengers that the spies had already left the city.

Why did she lie? Why did she put her own life in peril? For the same reason that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son – she trusted in the Lord, the God of the Hebrews.

Now, along with the rest of the people of Jericho, she knew what God had done in the past. She had heard about the mighty works God had performed in Egypt, parting the waters of the Red Sea for the people to escape from Pharaoh's army. The people of Jericho had heard about the great military victories the Israelites had achieved over the people on the East side of the Jordan River. They knew all these facts about God, and their hearts melted within them in fear.

But they also believed that God was going to do great things in the future. Rahab said that, along with the rest of the people in town, she knew God was going to give the land of Jericho into the hands of the Israelites. It was because of this belief that the terror of the Israelites had fallen on the people of Jericho that they had all become fainthearted. In short, the people of Jericho knew what God had done and they believed what God was going to do, but their beliefs only made them more afraid of God, more determined to resist Him and His people.

So, what was different about Rahab? Like Abraham, she didn't just believe in what God had done in the past. And she didn't just believe in what God was going to do in the future. No, like Abraham, she surrendered to God in the present. Going against her people, she took God's side. She said to the spies, "The Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath." And out of this trust in God, she took action. She hid the spies even though if any of the other people in Jericho found out what she had done, she would certainly have been killed as a traitor.

This, then, is the challenge James has for us. We say we believe all those things in the Apostles' Creed. We say we believe that God will save us from our sins and that He will complete our redemption when Christ comes again in glory. But do we really trust God? Do we trust Him enough to obey Him today, not just with our lips but with our lives, not just with words but with concrete actions?

How might we act out that sort of trust in God today? Well, I suppose that depends on what He wants us to do, doesn't it? In today's passage James gives us one obvious example – caring for the poor with more than good thoughts and good wishes but with material help. Do we know any folks in our own community who are having trouble meeting their daily needs? Or maybe we think of the folks in Wilkinson County or in South Louisiana who lost everything they had, and never thought they would need flood insurance. How might we obey God by demonstrating His love to the needy?

Yes, we know God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves. So, don't we all know folks who have other sorts of needs – those who are lonely or in pain, those who could use a hug or a visit or a

phone call? Are we willing to go out of our way, to sacrifice some of the items on our agendas to show the love of Christ to them?

And if we aren't, if we aren't willing to put our faith in God ahead of our self-interest, if we aren't willing to risk our time, our talents, our treasure, or even our lives for God and for the people He loves so much, can we really say that we trust God at all? Can we truly say we have faith? Or without any works to demonstrate its reality, is our faith really dead?