

The Epistle of James

Lesson #7

November 7, 2021

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.

- Most of you, if not all of you, are members of Crossgate Church. And at some point in the process of joining the church, you met with the elders and told us about yourself. Part of the reason for that was just the “getting to know you” part. But you also shared your testimony with us of how you came to Christ, and how you are walking with him now.
 - Our job was to try and discern whether or not your profession of faith was credible. We’re not omniscient. And we are certainly not infallible. But we can get some idea of that just based on how you talk about it.
 - So for example, imagine if someone came to meet with us and said, “Yeah, I’m saved. I believe in Jesus and all that. I got baptized when I was nine years old, along with all the rest of my buddies. We all went down together. But I really don’t care too much for the Bible and I’d really rather go fishing than come to church, so I won’t be attending very often... but definitely Christmas and Easter... maybe. Anyway, I’m just trying to get my kid into that private Christian school across the street, and they say I have to be a member of a local church. So here I am.”
 - Would you be surprised if we were maybe a bit suspicious of the genuineness of that profession?
- That’s pretty much what James has been doing throughout his epistle. He’s been challenging his readers to make sure their walk matches their talk.

- For many of us, one of the first passages of scripture we ever memorized was 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.*
- And if you've been around Crossgate Church for much time at all, you will no doubt have heard that truth proclaimed often: we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone.
- That is the gospel, friends. That's good news. We cannot save ourselves; but God *can* and *does* save sinners through faith in his only begotten Son Jesus Christ.
- So then why does James appear to be challenging that idea? Why does he seem to be suggesting that our works are part of the equation?
- Let me ask you a question. Have you ever heard a preacher say something like this? "First, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you; then I'm going to tell you; and then I'm going to tell you what I told you."
- Well, that's what I'm going to do today. And here's what I'm going to tell you.

The key to understanding James 2:14-26 is to recognize that when James speaks of justification, or of being justified, he is NOT speaking about being declared righteous in the eyes of God; he is speaking about being justified in making a claim of having saving faith... before others, and before yourself.

- Let me say that again. When James talks about someone being justified, he is not discussing whether or not they have been declared righteous in the eyes of God, which is the way we normally think about that word in Protestant and Reformed churches. Rather, James is speaking about being justified before men, providing evidence that our profession of faith is valid.

LET'S BREAK IT DOWN AND SEE IF THAT IS TRUE.

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

- The first thing we might want to know is, why is James asking these questions?
- Let's think about what he has just been teaching.
 - In 1:22 James says, "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."
 - In 1:25 he says don't be a "hearer who forgets but a doer who acts".
 - In 1:26-27 he teaches that there is such a thing as a false religion or faith that is worthless.
 - In 2:1-13 he rebukes his readers for showing favoritism, and he demonstrates how that kind of behavior is inconsistent with the second great commandment.
 - Basically, James is concerned that some in the churches were deceiving themselves about their salvation.
- So these questions in verse 14 actually follow very well from those comments.

- Notice James' choice of words. He says, "What good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works?"
 - The focus is on the person's claim to faith.
- Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who said they were a Christian, and yet the longer the conversation went on, the more concerned you were -- even doubtful -- about the person's spiritual condition?
 - In fact, you actually found yourself doubting their claim.
 - A lot of people will claim to have faith. I will even go so far as to say most people claim to have faith, especially here in the South.
- But the question is, what kind of faith? Faith in whom? Faith in what?
- I've met some people who appear to have "faith in faith".
 - They'll make a claim to the effect that "everything is going to work out." When asked why they think that, they reply, "I just have faith."
- And that leads us to James' second question: *Can that faith save him?*
 - Or a better translation might be, "That faith can't save him, can it?"
 - It's really a rhetorical question. The answer is obviously "no".
- So let me suggest the following restatement of verse 14.

My brothers and sisters, what good or benefit is there in someone claiming to have faith, if there are no good deeds or works to validate that claim? Surely, the faith he is claiming to have isn't saving faith, wouldn't you agree?

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 presents a hypothetical, which sounds a lot like Jesus' teaching about the final judgement in Matthew 25:31-40.

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

- James presents this hypothetical, and asks the question, "what good is that?" And once again, the answer is obvious – none! No good whatsoever.

- Any person who would claim to be a Christian, and yet respond to this situation with mockery, should seriously question the validity of their faith.

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.

- Now we’re getting to the heart of it.
- Notice again the words, “someone will say”.
 - Someone objects and says, “Look, some people have faith, others have works. What’s the difference?”
- But James responds like the good Missourian he is. “Show me”. And this provides a clue to understanding this entire section.
 - It’s as if James is saying, “You’re making a claim of faith in Christ. Where is the evidence? Where is your proof?”

19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

- This seems to be a reference to the *shema* found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

- This is the passage Jesus used to answer the question about the greatest commandment.
- But whoever this objector is – whoever it is that is appealing to the *shema* to justify his claim – seems to have forgotten that Jesus also cited Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”
- Good theology isn’t proof. Good theology won’t get you into heaven. Even the devils have good theology.

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.

- James now uses an illustration he knows his readers will be familiar with. What about Father Abraham? Wasn’t he justified by works?
 - Well, if you’re talking about being justified before men, then the answer is yes.
 - Consider Genesis 22:5. Abraham says to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” But remember the context. He was on the way to the place where God had told him to sacrifice Isaac.
 - And what does the writer of Hebrews say about this? “[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead.”

- Abraham didn't have to prove anything to God. God already knows the hearts of every man. But he did prove something to himself, and to Isaac, and to his servants... and to us thousands of years later.
 - Abraham's faith was real. It was not just an empty profession.
- But, if you're talking about being justified before God, then the answer is no. And James knows it.
 - How do we know he knows? Because he says so.
 - He quotes from Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." That's the very definition of justification.
 - Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 22, by at least 15-20 years, I would guess.
 - In Genesis 15, Abraham was declared righteous in the sight of God because he believed God, that is, on the basis of faith. If now in Genesis 22 he is being justified before God on the basis of his works, then that means he must have become unjustified in the interim. And it also means there would be two different ways of being justified before God: by faith and by works.

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.

- If James were trying to make the case that a person is declared righteous in the sight of God based on their works, he certainly chose a strange (and weak) example by which to make the case.
 - Of all the Old Testament "heroes of the faith" James could have pointed to, he chose a prostitute.
- The account of Rahab is found in Joshua 2. She was a prostitute in Jericho whose only good work was protecting the two spies that Joshua had sent into the land.
 - But she testified to belief in the God of the Israelites: "I know that the LORD has given you the land"; "the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath."
- Was she justified before God because of this good work of hiding the spies? No. Was she justified before men because of this? Clearly.
 - Not only were she and her family spared by the Israelites during the attack on Jericho, but she is listed in the genealogy of Jesus, and is included in the Hall of Faith in the epistle of Hebrews.
- To summarize 2:14-26: Genuine saving faith manifests itself in many ways, not least of which is the performing of good works.
- James is pointing out the absurdity of claiming to have faith, and yet not having any evidence to substantiate that claim.
 - To quote Martin Luther, "It is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire."
- Even though some have insisted that James and Paul were in conflict on this point, the evidence of Scripture shows otherwise.
 - Ephesians 2:8-10 *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.

- *Titus 3:4-8 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.*
- Okay. I told you what I was going to tell you; and then I told you. So now let me tell you what I just told you.
 - **The key to understanding James 2:14-26 is to recognize that when James speaks of justification, or of being justified, he is NOT speaking about being declared righteous in the eyes of God; he is speaking about being justified in making a claim of having saving faith... before others, and before yourself.**