

## Message Series: The Reign of Grace

### Today's Message: Justified by a Faith that Works / 9-1-2022 / Jeff Kennedy

James 2:14–26 “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. <sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works. <sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder.

There are three doctrines that are central to the Christian Faith that first century Jews had the most difficulty embracing:

- (1) the doctrine of the incarnation—Yahweh, the God of the Jews was embodied in a human life—Jesus of Nazareth.
- (2) the doctrine of the atonement—that the God of the universe sent his Son to die on a Roman cross for the forgiveness and pardon of sins.
- (3) the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. We should understand that fundamentally many Jewish groups believed in God and his grace. He had graciously chosen them, and given them the Torah. But some of the Jews had inherited a long tradition of seeking righteousness by their works of obedience to Moses’ law. Put simply, for them there could be no salvation for the nation or the individual apart from a works righteousness which Paul thinks is the setting aside of faith replaced by works.

**Main Thought for Today:** Correctly interpreted, Paul and James are united in their understanding of faith and works and their relationship to justification. However, there is an apparent conflict between the two authors that Christians must reconcile if we hold that all Scripture is inspired by God and an infallible witness on all areas to which it speaks.

Today we’re looking at two texts that, on the surface, appear to contradict each other.

Let’s look at the two texts together.

Romans 3:28 “For we conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

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

So how do we reconcile this apparent disagreement?

**Paul and James use the same terms to address two different problems:**

**1. Paul is addressing “works without faith” and James is addressing “faith without works.”**

Notice how James frames the subject—“Can such faith save a person”? What kind of faith is he talking about?

James 2:14 “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him?” James is focusing on the person who claims to have faith but whose life shows no evidence of genuine belief in Christ.

Now, Paul is clearly concentrating on a different audience with a different problem. Look at what he says in Romans 9...

Rom 9:32 (NIV) “What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; <sup>31</sup> but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. <sup>32</sup> Why not? Because they pursued it **not by faith** but as if it were **by works**.” Paul is clearly addressing a person who claims to obtain righteousness merely by the works of the law prescribed by Moses *apart from faith*.

**Paul is speaking to the problem of works apart from faith and James is speaking the problem of faith devoid of works.** Paul is here in Rom 3, 4, 9 denying the need for pre-conversion works while James is insisting on the need for post-conversion works as evidence of genuine faith (Martin, *WBC*, 81).

**But the second thing we need to see is that...**

**2. Paul uses the term “faith” broadly, while James uses it narrowly. Now historically, Christian theologians would agree that the so-called faith that James criticizes is indeed *false faith*.**

James criticizes a faith that *panders* to the rich and ignores the poor.

He denies a faith that is mere *pious sentimentality* “be warm and be filled.”

And he rejects a so-called “faith” that is merely a *profession* of one’s belief system.

**There are three dimensions to Christian faith:**

- **Faith as “agreement”:** **belief that**. James 2:19 states “You *believe that* God is one. Good! (Now, notice that James says this dimension of Christian faith is “good” not wrong) Even the *demons believe*—and they shudder.” This is how James is speaking of faith in a narrow sense—mere affirmation of truth statements. But even the unredeemed demonic spirits that oppose the gospel hold to this belief. In fact, *I imagine that the devil and his angels are more orthodox in their understanding* of God’s nature than any of us. Orthodox beliefs are foundational to Christian faith, but mere orthodoxy cannot save you. Because right belief is only one (although a vital) dimension of saving faith.

Look at what the author of Hebrews writes,

Heb 11:6 “Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must *believe that* he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” The author of Hebrews affirms that faith involves “believing that” God exists and that he is faithful to do what he promised. This is intellectual agreement with the truth claims of the Gospel.

The Apostle John agrees, in fact he stated this as the purpose of his Gospel,

John 20:31 “But these [signs] are written so that you may *believe that* Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

And of course, Paul agrees with this,

1 Thess 4:14 “For if we *believe that* Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

Faith includes a cognitive dimension where we intellectually agree *that* the claims of the gospel are true. Right belief is a vital aspect of Christian faith.



### But faith involves a secondary dimension...

- **Faith as “trust”:** belief *in*. More than believing that Jesus is God’s Son, Savior and Lord, we believe *in Christ* for salvation. John says in John 1:11–12 “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who did **receive him**, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who **believe in** his name.” Ok, this is just John 3:16 “He gave his one and only Son so that all who **believe in him** may have eternal life.” That faith is entrusting ourselves to more than a propositional truth claim but to a person—to Jesus who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. This belief is trusting reception “receiving him” and then being able to believe in him.

Paul also affirms that genuine faith involves believing in or *on* Christ.

Romans 10:11 “For the Scripture says, **Everyone who believes on him will not be put to shame**”

**Illus. My dad was deathly afraid of flying.** I distinctly remember watching TV one evening and we were watching some show that had an airliner landing and my dad said immediately “You’ll never see me on one of those blankety blank things. Just look at the wings” which were fighting turbulence. “But” I replied, “It landed safely.” He said, “Not me buddy! Never.” Now, there was no set of data that you could put before my father to convince him that flying was vastly safer than driving. The irony, is that my dad died in a horrific car accident. He would have, statistically been much safer to fly to work in a plane.

Now what was he saying? He wasn’t denying the reality of planes taking off and landing 1000 times a day safely. He was saying “I don’t believe *in them*—I’ll never entrust myself to it.” Understand that faith is more than mere **intellectual ascent**. It’s more than a matter of intellectual agreement, it is entrusting the entirety of your life, yourself, your eternity to the God who loves you, the Son who died for you, and the Spirit who now fills and baptizes you.

## And there is a third dimension to Christian faith is its necessary outworking...

- **Faith as “faithfulness”:** belief in action. Paul told the Galatians 5:6 “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; what matters is *faith working* through love.” Paul is answering two questions in Galatians: (1) Who are the people of God and (2) What is the sign/badge of covenant membership? Notice Paul’s contrast here. He contrasts the works of the law apart from faith with faith that works itself out love for God and love for others.

***The nature of faith is that it is alive and living things move.***

**Illus. Growing up in VA we would regularly find a dead possum in the backyard.** More than once I can remember walking up on one and thinking “that thing is really dead”—you’d pick it up by the tail to throw it back into the woods and it would suddenly come alive losing its mind scratching and clawing its way to freedom. And we’d spend the rest of our afternoon getting rabies shots. ***Living things move.***

**Heb 11:4** “by faith Abel ***offered*** to God a better sacrifice”

**Heb 11:7** “By faith, Noah...***built*** an ark”. Speaking of Noah’s faith, the French reformer, John Calvin stated, “The faith he had in God’s Word was turned into the obedience to God which was demonstrated in his building the ark...Here the apostle points out the obedience which flows out of faith as water from a fountain” (John Calvin, *Commentaries*).<sup>1</sup>

**Heb 11:8** “By faith, Abraham...***obeyed*** and ***set out***” for a new and undiscovered country and “***offered up*** Isaac.”

This is what Paul says elsewhere

**Titus 3:6–8** “He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior <sup>7</sup> so that, having been justified by his grace, we may become heirs with the hope of eternal life. <sup>8</sup> This saying is trustworthy. I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have **believed God** might be careful to devote themselves to **good works**. These are good and profitable for everyone.”

**See, there is no sense in which the authors of the NT and Paul thought that faith was merely intellectual agreement with propositional truth statements.** In their writings they could not divorce faith from its immediate and necessary effect—belief in action.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Haroutunian and Louise Pettibone Smith, *Calvin: Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 244.

Let's look at James' text because this third dimension is what he's stressing.

**James 2:17** "In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.

And so, it can be said with confidence that the "righteous are justified by faith; and the righteous will live by faith." This is a faith that affirms the truth, believes in Christ alone for salvation, and expresses itself in faithful living and righteousness.

**3. For Paul, faith is the only means of being declared in the right (justified); for James works are the only means of demonstrating one's right standing.**

**The two authors use the term "justification" differently also.**

- **Paul:** Justification is the declaration of the believer's right standing. He cites the beginning of Abraham's story as his evidence. God made a promise to Abraham, and he believed that it was true and believed in God to bring it to pass. And Moses reflects on that holy moment: Gen 15:6 "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." So faith is the only means by which Abraham can be declared in right standing in relationship to God.
- **James:** Justification is demonstrated by a believer's works. James also quotes that passage but as a summary of Abraham's actual obedience—he cites the end of Abraham's story offering Isaac as evidence of genuine saving faith Gen 22:1–19. The angel of the Lord has to stop him mid swing and that's how committed he was to obeying God. Gen 22:12 "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from me." Wait, did God know that back in Genesis 15? Whose benefit is God saying this for? Not his own. Now this statement is an assessment of Abraham's faith after having been tested. It's the same faith Abraham had in Gen 15 when God declared him righteous—but now it's gone through a series trials and tests which has displayed the genuineness of his belief in that promise.

**How do we know this is what James is talking about?** James uses three words that clue us in on his central thought.

James 2:18 "But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." **Show me** (Gk. *deiknumi*; to make known that which is hidden) your faith without works, and I will **show you** faith by my works." James' burden is to establish how genuine justifying faith is evidenced in the life of the Christian. How is it **shown** in the believer?

2:22 “Faith was active together with his works, and by faith was **made complete** (Gk. *teleioō*; to perfect or bring to a full measure), <sup>23</sup> and the Scripture was **fulfilled** (Gk. *plēroō*; to bring something already started to its intended completion) that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Hebrews 11:7 “By faith Abraham, when he was **tested**, offered up Isaac.” He was already *declared* in the right before God (Gen 15:6) but then that faith was tested and *demonstrated* to be of a genuine character.

Hebrews 12:1–2 “Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, <sup>2</sup> keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” The NT doesn’t teach that a person can be justified by works of self-righteousness apart from faith—*that’s Paul’s burden*. And the NT knows nothing a secretive, ingrown faith that is not perfected in trials and shown to be genuine. Paul’s emphasis is on pioneering faith which justifies fully and sufficiently, and James’ focus is on the works that demonstrate that faith to be of genuine character—to be living and active.

**Illus. I’ve got a tree in my backyard that is dead.** Now, if I took you into my yard today and asked, “Which one of these trees do you think is dead?” You’d would immediately know. It’s branches have grayed and produced no leaves.

**Jesus said “You know a tree by its fruit.** A good tree bears good fruit while a bad tree nothing.”

**Summary:** Paul’s appeals to the initial justifying act of Abraham’s faith which results in God declaring him to be in the right. Before Abraham had done anything, been circumcised, had laws to obey etc...he was simply given a promise and he believed *that* it was true and he believed *in* the God who would do what he said he would do. And he was faithful to work out that salvation with fear and trembling before a holy God.

#### **Application:**

- **Corporate application:** We have an obligation to acknowledge that justification is by faith—and that faith is shown to be genuine in the outworking of loving kindness. A living faith produces the fruit of righteousness.

#### **Individual application:**

- There are some in this room have only a mere profession of faith. It is a mere intellectual agreement that certain doctrines of the Christian faith are true but not personal. You may have grown up in a home and just been taught to believe certain truths but that faith has never translated for you into a personal entrusting of your whole self to it. You believe that planes take off and land, Good. Even the demons believe that. But today is the day that you get on the plane. Those who received him, to those who believed in Him—he gave the right to become children of God. Today you are going beyond a mere intellectual



agreement with the truth and you receive it and you trust it. Both Paul and James would agree—a mere acknowledgement of the truth is insufficient.

- There are some in this room who may have thought that your works is all that matters. God isn't going to judge you based on a belief system, he's going to judge you solely on the basis of what you do and your works. But both Paul James would say to you today—friend you are mistaken. God will declare you in right standing before the bar of his justice—he declares you pardoned of sin by means of faith apart from your works.
- There may be some in this room who have genuinely come to trust in Christ alone for salvation. You believe that Jesus died for your sins and you believe in him for salvation. And you find yourself in the midst of suffering, trials and hardship. Understand that it's the testing of our faith that produces endurance and flowers into an eternal hope. And you just need the grace to get through it this morning.