

James

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December 14, 2022



James 2:14-26

Introduction

- Critics often want to use this passage to drive a wedge between Paul and James, given Paul's emphasis on being saved through grace alone. But a closer look shows just the opposite. John the Baptist preached that people should prove their repentance by the quality of their deeds (Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8). In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:16, Jesus tells us to "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven". Further in The Sermon, in Matthew 7:15-20, the Lord speaks of true vs. false believers and states plainly, "You will know them by their fruits", (vs. 20). Indeed the central theme of The Parable of the Judgement in Matthew 25 is that the truly saved will naturally do good works without even thinking about it.

- And it's not like doing good works is not to be found in Paul's letters. In Romans 2:6 he reminds us that The Judgement will be rendered to each person according to their deeds (quoting Psalms 62:12). He goes on to say in Romans 14:12 that each of us ultimately will give an account of our deeds to God. You see this theme repeated in 1 Corinthians 3:8; 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Colossians 3:9.

- So it is not Paul's view of salvation by grace alone that James is arguing against, but rather the perversion of it. Paul bases everything on the simple phrase, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved", (Acts 16:31). But people take belief on two levels. There is intellectual belief where you mentally understand, but that belief has no direct effect on your life. A person may have been baptized as an infant or even immersed as a teenager, but their belief in Christ is purely an intellectual exercise. They believe in God the same as they believe in basic mathematics – it's there when I need it, but it doesn't really impact my life in any significant way. We see this in people who misuse the theological position of "once saved, always saved". Too many believe that once they have believed the right thing, confessed the right thing, and been baptized, their

ticket to Heaven is punched and they are now free to live however they choose. It is this abuse of Paul's position on salvation by grace alone is what James is condemning.

Vss. 14 – 17

- James offers a plain illustration to his point. Someone claiming to be a follower of Jesus Christ is confronted by someone naked and hungry, yet they do nothing but offer them a verbal blessing to send them on their way. This plainly contradicts the words of Christ in Matthew 25's Parable of the Judgement (read Matthew 25:31-46). This is the failure, the sin, of the Priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37).
- For James' Jewish Christian friends this was not a hard concept. Alms giving to the poor was a central part of Jewish culture. But to the Greeks, especially those influenced by the Stoics, caring for others outside your family was a new concept, as it is for many people today.

Vss. 18 – 19

- A counter argument is that one can be a Christian by either intellectual faith or works. James will have none of it. It is never either/or but always both/and. This is what Jesus was alluding to in Matthew 9:37-38. "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the harvest." It is not enough to sit on the sidelines and agree that the harvest must be brought in. The Lord requires that we get up and act and work and get out there, getting our hands dirty to bring in the harvest.

Vss. 20 – 26

- James offers the church two Biblical examples of what he's getting at. First, he points to Abraham. To begin with God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, that his descendants would outnumber the stars. But as Abraham and his wife Sarah aged well beyond childbearing years, a miracle took place and she had a son named Isaac. In Genesis 22 we find the story of God requesting that Abraham offer Isaac as a burnt offering. How will God's promise be kept if now Abraham's only son dies on the altar? Abraham did not know, but had faith in God. He **knew** God would keep His promise. How God would do that he could not see, but he believed

that God would keep His promise. He built an altar, placed the boy on it, and was ready to drive the knife into him when God interrupted and gave a ram instead. Abraham proved his faith by his works, his actions.

- The same was true with Rahab. She is an interesting Old Testament character. Joshua had sent spies into Canaan, with specific instruction to spy out the great city of Jericho. Curiously they went to the house of the prostitute Rahab. Evidently they were not very good spies because the King's guards immediately came knocking on Rahab's door looking for the men. She lied to protect them and then sent the guards on a wild goose chase while sneaking the men out another way with instructions on how to return safely to the Israelite camp. But as she did so, she confessed that she had heard of the great things the God of Israel had done and how she believed that God would give Israel the land and that when that day came would Israel be so kind as to be merciful to her and the family for the good deed she has done them. And it was so. There is a Jewish legend that Rahab married Joshua and became a Jew herself, so that she was a direct ancestor of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Abraham's deed proved his faith, even when nothing made any common sense. Rahab had been a pagan prostitute, but upon hearing of the mighty acts of God she had faith and for that faith she risked her life and the lives of her father's family.
- Thus what James argues here is that faith and works are not opposites but are inseparable. No one will be moved to action in the name of Jesus without faith and no one's faith is real unless they are moved to action.