

Scripture Reading: James 2:14-26 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

<sup>14</sup>What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? <sup>17</sup>Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

<sup>18</sup>But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." <sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

<sup>20</sup>But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

<sup>21</sup>Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; <sup>23</sup>and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God.

<sup>24</sup>You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup>In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

<sup>26</sup>For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. I have been doing a series of sermons in the Epistle of James, my favorite New Testament book. Many people love this book because it has many practical things to say on how to live the Christian life. Last week, I covered the first half of chapter 2 of James, which was an exhortation not to show favoritism at church, favoring one type of person over another. That was a relatively easy topic to talk about. But in the second half of James chapter 2, there is quite a complicated issue that we have to deal with.

Take a look at the title of my message today: "Saved by Faith. Saved by Works." So, which is it? Are we saved by faith? Are we saved by works? Is it a contradiction to affirm both of these aspects of the way to salvation? This topic has been controversial in the history of the church and in the history of Christian theology, especially since the days of the Protestant Reformation. Some teachers stress what the Apostle Paul said about salvation being just by faith ... by grace through faith, as Ephesians chapter 2 states. Some people say that James is directly contradicting Paul in this passage that we are looking at today. But is that true? This is a rather complicated topic, but I hope I will be able to show you today that it need not be considered so terribly complicated, nor are Paul and James contradicting each other. In fact, as I hope to show you, Paul and James do not contradict each other but rather they argue for the same things but from somewhat different angles. In fact, they even appeal to the same Old Testament passage about Abraham to affirm their respective viewpoints.

Part 1: Protestant affirmations – Salvation by faith alone.

You have heard me speak before about the five affirmations of the Protestant Reformation ... five principles. These five principles are stated in Latin – here they are:

1. *Sola Scriptura* = "By Scripture Alone."
2. *Sola Fide* = "By Faith Alone."
3. *Sola Gratia* = "By Grace Alone."
4. *Solo Christo* = "By Christ Alone."
5. *Soli Deo Gloria* = "Glory to God Alone."

These are often referred to as "the five solas." The first one, *Sola Scriptura*, means that Scripture (the Bible) is our final and ultimate authority on all matters of Christian faith and practice. The Bible stands above all church traditions. This was an extremely important issue during the

Protestant Reformation because the mediaeval church seemed to have put so many man-made church traditions above some of the plain teachings of Scripture and even sometimes contradicted Scripture.

The second principle here is *Sola Fide*, “By Faith Alone.” Salvation is by faith alone, asserted the Protestants. They had to make this assertion because throughout the Middle Ages, the established church had added many practices that made the people believe they had to earn salvation by doing various kinds of meritorious works. The Protestants said No – salvation cannot be earned and we do not gain salvation by works of any kind. As you can see, I am beginning to touch on the topic of today’s passage in James chapter 2 – the issue of faith and works and how they relate to each other.

Martin Luther was awakened to this truth when he read Romans 1:17 (NIV) – “For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘*The righteous will live by faith*’.” This statement was written by the Old Testament prophet Habbakkuk, chapter 2, verse 4: “*The righteous will live by his faith*.” If you want to be truly righteous, you live the Christian life by faith, not by following a system that demands that you do a bunch of good deeds in order to work your way to heaven. We live by faith, not by works. This was the truth that Martin Luther discovered and which ignited the Protestant Reformation.

The third principle is *Sola Gratia*, “By Grace Alone.” Salvation is entirely by God’s grace alone, a free gift from God – we do not earn it. Let’s take a look at Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB) – “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that [*i.e., that salvation*] not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Salvation is not of ourselves – it is the gift of God, by His grace. Salvation does not come about by works.

By faith alone. By grace alone. At this point, we might feel a bit of confusion. There are two “alones” mentioned here. Let me quote for you something said by theology professor Don Carson. He said this:

I recall, however, when I was a lad of maybe twelve or thirteen, wondering to myself, “How can salvation be by grace alone, by faith alone? That sounds like two ‘alones.’ If there are two ‘alones,’ then neither of them is ‘alone’ after all.” And of course, eventually, I grew a little to find that grace is the ground; it’s God’s free gift; it’s God’s unmerited favor poured out in the gift of His Son: Christ alone. Whereas to speak of salvation by faith alone, justification by faith alone, is not providing the ground, but the means of access. That is to say, we are declared just before God and have access to this declaration, to this status before God ... not by trying harder, but by faith.

So if grace is the ground, faith is the means. Grace is the root anchor by which God has poured out His lavish justification upon us. Faith is the means by which we access it. We trust Christ; we trust the promises of God; we trust in His death and burial and resurrection to be the ground by which we are declared just before God.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s look at Ephesians 2:8 again – “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Based on this verse and to clear up the confusion I mentioned a moment ago, you will often hear Protestant evangelicals say that “We are saved by grace alone through faith alone.”

This was an extremely important issue to clarify at the time of the Protestant Reformation: that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works. Ephesians 2:9 – “... not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” We do not gain salvation by works. We have no reason to boast that we have earned our way to heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, E. M. Humphrey, S. Hahn, M. Bates, M. F. Bird, *TH351 Perspectives on Justification by Faith: Five Views on Its Meaning and Significance*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018). Unit 1, Segment 5.

So, what place do works have in the Christian life? Why does James connect salvation and works together?

James 2:14 (NASB) – “What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?”

Verse 20 – “But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

Part 2: Faith without works is useless.

During my college days, I belonged to a Christian fraternity named Alpha Gamma Omega. The theme Bible verse of our fraternity was 2nd Timothy 2:15 (NKJV) – “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (or: “... accurately handling the word of truth,” in the NASB). My Christian brothers and I often had serious theological conversations about various controversial topics in Christian theology, seeking to come to the right interpretation of the Scriptures. We sometimes discussed this passage in James and the relation between faith and works.

We noticed that some 20th-century fundamentalist preachers really preached hard on the notion that salvation was by faith alone, faith alone, faith alone – with no works involved. I got the feeling that they had turned the good Protestant emphasis of *Sola Fide* (Faith Alone) into a rigid ideology that was off-balance. Some of these preachers characterized the Roman Catholic Church as teaching that salvation comes from faith plus works (“Faith plus Works = Salvation”). These preachers countered that false teaching with a catchy slogan: “Faith plus Nothing = Salvation!” “*Faith plus Nothing = Salvation!*”

But this catchy slogan is itself misleading. It reduces the way of salvation to a very simplistic process that downplays a life of discipleship and service. It seemed to me that reducing the gospel to this simple formula could – and did – create Christians who felt that any kind of participation in Christian service was unnecessary. And seeking to live a godly life was likewise unnecessary. Yes, I heard such attitudes expressed. I concluded that the catchy slogan is problematic: “Faith plus Nothing = Salvation.”

I came up with my own alternative equation: “Faith plus Nothing = Salvation plus Works.” Works are present in the Christian life, but not as the way to salvation. The normal Christian life includes works. If works are absent, something is amiss. I was led to this conclusion by passages such as our main passage today in James chapter 2. And in Ephesians chapter 2 as well.

A moment ago, I quoted for you Ephesians 2:8-9. Let me read that to you again, but include verse 10 as well – “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that [*i.e., that salvation*] not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” Good works certainly have a part to play in the Christian walk – indeed, God designed it that way. Works have a part in our lifestyle as Christians. And I notice that verse 10 tells us that “we are His workmanship” – He is working on us, crafting us into the type of people He wants us to be. There is another verse in Philippians chapter 2 which says much the same thing, but I will share that verse with you a little later today.

So, what is it that James means when he ponders the question of whether faith without works can save us? Let’s read James 2:14-17 – “What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do

not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? <sup>17</sup>Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”

Faith, by itself, is dead. If you really had Christian faith, your heart would go out to that needy brother or sister and you would do something to meet their need. Most of us have something that we could give to a person in need. But if we just give pious-sounding words – “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled” – but don’t actually DO something practical to help the person, what use is that? Some of you might not have some resources you could share with a brother or sister in need, but most of us do have something and therefore ought to share something.

Let’s continue reading: James 2:18-20 – “But someone may well say, ‘You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’ <sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. <sup>20</sup>But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

Isn’t that interesting: “Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” Faith isn’t shown by pious-sounding words but by practical action. Faith is evidenced by what people see you doing, not by merely some words you speak. And look at what James says about the demons. They know as a piece of information that God exists and that He is one – they do believe that – but that isn’t saving faith. This is what some people have called “intellectual assent” – people can be intellectually convinced that there is a God and even that Jesus Christ is God’s Son sent into the world and even that Jesus died and rose again from the dead. But if you haven’t embraced that truth in your heart and become a follower of Jesus Christ and a disciple who lives by Christian principles, then that is mere intellectual assent to the existence of God and not saving faith. The demons know who God is and who Jesus Christ is ... and they shudder because they also know that because of their refusal to follow God, they will be losers in the end when Jesus returns and defeats all enemies. Merely admitting intellectually that God exists will not save you.

Let me quote theology professor Don Carson again. He says this in one of the video courses I watched when I was in seminary:

There is another element: ... faith also involves self-abandonment to that truth or to the God who speaks the truth. It involves our trust in Him. Satan believes that Jesus rose from the dead; Satan never trusts Christ. Satan believes that there is one God; he doesn’t abandon himself to God. Genuine saving faith is not to be confused with works, but it is of a different quality than mere belief in propositions. ... There must be a self-abandonment to God.

It has a kind of repentance built into it. It’s the very nature of faith to abandon myself to God and His word and His promises, or it’s not saving faith. ... Genuine saving faith not only believes the truth that God has revealed, but also it finds the believer abandoning himself, abandoning herself, to Christ in wonderful trust.<sup>2</sup>

Faith involves trust. And a self-abandonment to God.

Part 3: What do we mean by the word “works”?

There have been a variety of ways in which this word has been taken. In the previous equation I shared with you, “Faith plus works = Salvation,” the equation was coined as a criticism of Catholics and even some legalistic Protestants who seemed to be adding certain kinds of good works as requirements for salvation, “works” such as church attendance, financial giving, obeying certain practices like fasting during certain periods of the church year, and general good works for the purpose of earning one’s way to heaven. Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther saw the issue this way in the 16th century and it is still seen as an issue in our modern day. But James wasn’t exactly using the term “works” in this way.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Segment 4.

The Apostle Paul has much to say against “works.” But again, he is using the word in a different way than James is. That is why people often think that Paul and James are in opposition to each other, so people are sometimes confused by what looks like a contradiction. We have to remember that although the New Testament writings are inspired by the Holy Spirit, each human writer is an individual who sometimes uses words in somewhat different ways.

Paul said this in Romans 3:20 (NASB) – “Because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” Through the Old Testament Law comes the knowledge of sin ... but following the Law has never been the way of salvation. The way of salvation has always been by trusting in God and in God’s promises.

Paul continues in Romans 3:28-30 (NASB) – “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. <sup>29</sup>Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, <sup>30</sup>since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.” God will justify Jewish Christians by faith and Gentile Christians by faith.

Then Paul continues his argument in Romans 4:1-5 (NASB) – “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ <sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup>But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

Abraham was not justified by keeping the law of circumcision, a law that was given to him long after “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” – that is a quote from Genesis 15:6, when Abraham believed God’s promise that he would have a son and have many descendants. The law of circumcision was given to Abraham many years later, in Genesis 17.

What Paul says is that justification does not come from the works of the Old Testament law – justification comes by faith in God and His promises. James uses the word “works” differently than Paul does. And it is interesting that James quotes the very same verse in Genesis 15:6 to make the point that he desires to make: that true faith acts. And what James points to as an example of true faith acting is when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis 22.

Let’s read James 2:21-24 – “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; <sup>23</sup>and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup>You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

What God was doing in Genesis 22 was testing Abraham’s faith. As Abraham lifted the knife to make to sacrifice, God stopped him and said these words in Genesis 22:12 – “He said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me’.”

Remember what James said in James 1:2-4, that testings of our faith will come. Tests of faith produce endurance. And in Genesis 22, God tested Abraham. Abraham acted – he obeyed God’s command, and when God saw that Abraham was going to proceed all the way to obey that command, God stopped him at the right moment. For James, Abraham’s obedience in Genesis 22 proved the faith Abraham expressed in Genesis 15.

It is interesting that in the Apostle Paul's great theological work, the Epistle to the Romans, in the very first mention of faith in that letter and in the very last mention of it, Paul writes of "the obedience of faith."

Romans 1:5 (NASB) – "Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake."

Romans 16:26 (NASB) – "But now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith."

True faith obeys. True faith acts.

Let me share another quote. This comes from the same video course I took, but it comes from a lecture by theology professor Edith M. Humphrey. She says this:

I think that we can see a harmony between the two New Testament writers [Paul and James] if we understand that they are using both the words "faith" and "works" in different ways. By "faith," Paul meant trust in Christ; by "works," he meant the specific works of Torah (circumcision, the kosher laws, and Sabbath) – those works that marked off a Jew as a member of the covenant ... By "faith," which he says is not enough, James meant more than a belief that something was so. He's not talking so much about a belief in God, but the worry that someone will simply have a bare intellectual assent to certain doctrines. And by "works," James meant what Paul calls "fruit," because such good actions and characteristics never come only from within us, but from the work of the Holy Spirit coming to fruition in us.<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle Paul is not negative toward works. For he, as well as James, works are a normal part of the Christian life. One of my favorite verses is Philippians 2:12-13 – "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

Believers work, and God works. Paul tells his people to work – not for salvation, but as a part of the normal life of Christian believers. And he tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who works through us to accomplish His purposes.

James gives us three examples of what he means by works that are a part of true saving faith. The first is in his opening verses in this passage, verses 14-17: practical works of mercy to a brother or sister in need, such as providing clothing or food. The second example that James gives is in verses 21-24: Abraham's prompt obedience of faith in Genesis 22.

And the third example comes in James 2:25 – "In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?"

If you read the story in Joshua chapter 2, which Pastor Bruce preached on just a few months ago, you see her faith and you see her actions in response to her faith: she believed in the power of the God of the Israelites, and she protected the messengers and helped them escape. She was rewarded for her act of faith: the messengers promised her that she and her family would be spared during the attack on Jericho, and she later married one of the Israelites and she ended up being the great-grandmother of King David.

When James says that both Abraham and Rahab were "justified by works," what he means is that their works bore evidence of their faith and their justification was shown to be perfected – that is, that their justification was shown to be full and complete.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Unit 2, Segment 12.

#### Part 4: Embodied faith.

At the end of his discussion on faith and works, we read this in James 2:26 – “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”

True saving faith that justifies is faith that acts: faith that puts trust in God and obeys Him and leads to genuine concern for others and to acts of mercy.

The Greek word for “faith” is *pistis*. It means more than just faith in something. It also means “faithfulness,” as in being faithful to somebody, being reliable. When we are faithful to God, we are not only showing trust in Him and being reliable to Him, but also showing allegiance to Him.

Theology professor Matthew Bates has this to say:

We are mistaken if we believe that *pistis* is primarily an interior movement of the will rather than an embodied, enacted relational posture in the New Testament time period. *Pistis* was not conceptualized as purely an internal movement of the mind, but as a relational activity with regard to others. ... For Paul, *pistis* is something you do with your mind and your body that is primarily directed outward, not inward.<sup>4</sup>

James would agree with that. True faith is an embodied faith. It is a faith that can be seen in our actions. Our actions show what we really believe. That’s what James means by being justified by works. Our works show that our faith is full and mature.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Unit 4, Segment 28.