

Ministry From James-02

by Dwight Pentecost

James teaches that faith is a living thing that produces fruit, and that faith without works is dead and not genuine.

Duration: 28:38

Scripture: James 1:1, James 2:14-19, James 2:24

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Faith And Works"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher addresses the apparent conflict between the teachings of Paul and James regarding justification by faith and works. He emphasizes that there cannot be two different systems of justification in the Bible, so there must be a way to reconcile these teachings. The preacher uses three illustrations to make his point: the hungry and cold, the demons who believe, and an Old Testament biblical example. He concludes that faith without works is dead and proves itself to be not genuine faith at all.

Transcript

Let me tonight take this into the second chapter of James, in the beginning of verse 14. This is a passage of scriptures that is confused many, and some see a conflict between the teaching of Paul and the teaching of James. They see two different theologies, or two different systems, in Romans and James.

Paul declares, categorically, in Romans 4, that a man is justified by faith. James, James, James, chapter 2 says a man is justified by what? Nothing could be further apart than justification by faith and justification by what? They're the opposite of free. Now, how are we going to resolve this conflict? We can't have the Bible teaching two different systems of justification.

There can only be one way of approach to God, and that's God's revealed way. And who's right? James or Paul? Some say that James is writing with an undeveloped doctrine, an undeveloped theology. That James really belongs to the Old Testament.

He's thinking of an Old Testament concept. He's thinking in terms of the law, and James doesn't really belong to the New Testament at all. He's Old Testament doctrine.

Now, difficulty with that is that justification was never by works in the Old Testament. The law never saved anybody in the Old Testament. And Abraham, who lived in the Old Testament, wasn't justified by works.

He was justified by faith. There's only one principle of justification. So you can't say we ought to throw James into the Old Testament.

So there are others who come along and say we ought to throw James out of Zion. But James just didn't understand New Testament teaching. And he was writing before full revelation, we ought to ignore James.

And then there are others who feel that there is a harmony between James and Paul, and look for some harmony so that Paul can say a man is justified by faith, James can say a man is justified by works, and they not contradict each other. That's what we want to look at in this passage tonight, to find the resolution of the problem, because I think you will agree with me that there is no more important question that a man faces than the question, how can a man be declared acceptable to God? After all, God's the one to take the turn on which men come to himself. God's answer to that question is of vital importance.

So James is going to discuss this issue. And he begins by asking a question in verse 14. What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith and hath not works? Can faith save him? May I use a marginal reading that I think brings out what James is saying here.

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith and hath not works? Can that kind of faith save him? Can that kind of faith save him? Now, what James is doing in verse 14 is not tell us how a man is saved. James, in verse 14, is defining what faith is. He isn't trying to teach that faith saves.

He's trying to show us what faith is. And according to James, faith is something that is living, which demonstrates it is alive by reproducing itself. Faith is living, and what is living reproduces itself.

So you know, I mean, pause and let that begin, because this is vital to the whole passage. What James is trying to teach us, that what professes to be faith must be put to a test. Does that which claims to be faith produce anything? Or does the person who claims to have faith reproduce anything in his life? Does the person who says, I have faith, demonstrate the genuineness of his faith by letting that faith produce that which is the fruit of faith and is therefore acceptable to God? Now, James is giving us this simple proposition.

When a man claims to have faith, to believe God, don't accept it just on the basis of his words. Look at his life and see if his life produces that which can be called the fruit of faith. That which is not faith is barren, sterile, and dead, and never can and never will reproduce.

So if a man says, I have faith, but there is never any product of faith, that which he calls faith is not faith at all in the sight of God. Because if it's not living, it's not faith. And if it's not reproducing, it's not living.

And that's the thought in James' mind. Again I say, James is not trying to tell us how a man is faith, by works as opposed to false doctrines of faith, as though James were out to discredit Paul. He's trying to define what faith is.

Let me read verse 14. What does it profit, my brethren, or what fruit is there, my brethren, of a man saying he has faith? Can, and he does not have works to prove the validity of his faith, can that which calls itself faith but is proven to be not faith because it doesn't reproduce save a person? And of course the answer is no. It takes life to beget life, and faith lives so that faith can produce that which is living because it is living.

And a man is saved by faith, but what is dead has no right to go under the guise of faith. So James says, don't take a man's word, look for the fruit. And if there's no fruit, it's not faith.

Now, there may be weak faith and strong faith. There may be degrees of faith, and one may have little faith and another have much faith. That's possible.

But there is no such thing as living faith and dead faith because what's dead is not faith. There is no such thing as a genuine faith that does not work. That's not faith.

So there isn't a faith that works and a faith that doesn't work. Faith works. That which doesn't work is not faith.

So you can talk about weak faith and strong faith or little faith and much faith, but don't ever talk about living faith and dead faith because that ain't so. All right. That kind of faith, or that which parades as faith, but which is not faith because there's no life in it, can never save an individual.

Now, James is going to proceed to give us several illustrations of this definition of faith. Faith is that which is alive, and what is alive always reproduces itself. The first illustration is in verse 15 and 16.

If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warm, be ye filled, notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful of the body, what do your words profit them? And you can make them sound as puppetish and preacherish and pietistic as you want to, but to say the word will never close and feed the individual. Your word has to be accompanied by action if the individual is to be fed and clothed. Do you see his point? Words will never meet a need.

Words must be accompanied by action to have any benefit. And so he draws a conclusion in verse 17. Just as words not supported by action profit the hungry and the cold nothing, even so that which calls itself faith, if it's not accompanied by work, is dead.

It's dead. And what does that prove? Now remember, I insisted there's no such thing as dead faith. What does it prove? It's not faith at all.

Isn't that right, guys? Good. Thank you. You see, it's not faith at all.

Now he's going on to his second illustration. A man may say, thou hast faith and I have work. Show me thy faith without thy work.

Now is that possible? You can't prove faith without work. There is no way under God's heaven whereby you can prove you have faith without work. Show me thy faith without thy work.

And the person has to say, I can't do that. So the man turns right around and says, all right. I will show thee my faith, and how do I show you my faith? By my work.

Now he's showing us the place of work in a believer's life. Works are not designed to win salvation from God. But works are designed to be a demonstration of what can never be proved by word alone.

And that's the purpose of work, to prove the validity of faith. I can't prove my faith without work, but by work I can prove faith. Not by work I merit faith or gain salvation, but by work I demonstrate that my faith is a living faith.

He's going to continue this. He wants to show in verse 19 that mental ascent that might call itself faith is not faith in God's sight. And he goes into hell to find an illustration of all places.

Now believe us that there is one God, that's faith without any work. Ascent to a doctrine. Well, he says, you know better than the devil, because the devil believes and trumps.

The demons in hell shudder at the almightiness of God. They give ascent. Are they saved? No.

Why not? Because faith without work is not faith. And to give ascent to a truth without that truth being translated into conduct is a valid and sterile and ineffectual thing in the sight of God. So he says, if you profess to have faith and do not demonstrate the genuineness of that faith by your work, you're no better than a demon.

Now, you didn't know that you were being likened to demons, did you? I'm using the you generically, not individually. And now he draws a conclusion to this second illustration in verse 20. Wilt thou know, O vain man? And vanity in Scripture doesn't have to do with fixing up your face or putting on a good suit of clothes.

Vanity has to do with a mind that is empty of genuine content. To be bubble-headed is about as good a way as I know to put this. Now he says, wilt thou know, O bubble-head, that faith without work is death and therefore proves itself to be not faith at all.

So he's given us the first illustration, the hungry and the cold. And words won't meet his needs. The words have to be accompanied by action.

The second illustration, you can only prove the genuineness of your faith by work. The demon professed to believe, but there is no accompanying fruit of that faith, so it's not faith at all in the sight of God that could save demons. Now he comes to the third. And he goes now to an Old Testament Biblical illustration.

These two that he drew in verse 15 and again verses 18 and 19 were logical illustrations, but now he goes to a Biblical illustration. Now remember that James is writing, as he states in 1.1, to the Twelve Tribes, that is to Jews. And if you want to stir the pride of an American, you talk about George Washington.

And if you want to stir the pride of a Jew, you go back to the father of his country, you talk about Abraham. So he says, now let's study Abraham, the first person in Scripture about whom it was specifically said he was justified by God. Now let's study Abraham and see how Abraham was justified before God.

And so he says, was not Abraham our father justified by work? Uh-oh, now it looks like he's crossing himself up or crossing me up. I don't know which. Abraham was justified by work.

You go into Genesis chapter 15, where Abraham was declared justified by God, and we read in verse 2 that Abraham addressed God and said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless? And God said, You're going to have a son. Verse 5. Look now toward the heaven and tell the stars if I'll be able to number them. And he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.

God made a promise. What was Abraham's response? Verse 6. He believed God. And as a Hebrew scholar like Bruce would tell you, the word translated believed here is the Hebrew word amen.

But we use it at the end of a prayer. And when we say amen, we are giving a sense of our minds and hearts and will to what has already been prayed. When Abraham said amen to God, he was saying, God, I understood it.

I love what you told me, and I believe it. Abraham believed God. God said, You're going to have a promise.

Amen, Lord. God said, Did I hear an amen? Yes, Lord. And God said to Abraham, Abraham, let me tell you something.

I'm going to count that amen as a basis for righteousness. I'm going to declare you, Abraham, acceptable to me. Now, what did Abraham do? All he did was to believe God, and he was justified by faith.

How, then, can James say, Abraham, our father, was justified by what? Well, you turn from Genesis 15 into Genesis 22. And Abraham in Genesis chapter 15 had believed God, and God that very moment declared Abraham justified. Isaac is born years later, and Isaac has grown to young manhood.

And God said to Abraham, Abraham, I want you to take him down to a mountain that I'll show you, and I want you to sacrifice him on an altar. You know the story about Abraham. So I packed up a small caravan with servants and firewood and his son, and they made a three-day journey and went and came to Mount Moriah.

He built an altar. He bound Isaac, put Isaac on an altar. He was ready to slay Isaac when God's hand halted the sacrifice of Isaac.

And then God said this. I'm reading Genesis 22 to 15. The angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the seashore, and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice.

Because thou hast obeyed my voice. Now where did disobedience come from? It was the product of faith. And the genuineness of Abraham's faith of Genesis 15 is demonstrated in the fruit of faith which is obedience in Genesis 22.

And how could subsequent generations in Israel know that Abraham's faith was a genuine faith? It was alive and it produced obedience. So obedience was the product of faith, but it was also the fruit of faith. So Abraham was justified by faith.

He was also justified by works because his works demonstrated the genuineness of the faith that had justified him. You see that? Abraham was justified by works when he had offered his son up on the altar. Now verse 22 gives us the interpretation.

Seeest thou how faith worked with his works? And by works faith was made perfect, or faith produced its fruit. The fruit of faith was obedience. How did Israel know Abraham was justified? By his obedience, by works.

How did God know Abraham was justified? By faith, because God can see faith. No man can see faith. You've never seen faith in me, nor have I ever seen faith in you.

I've seen the product of faith in you, but the only way I knew that you had faith was what your faith produced. The only way you can know I have faith is what faith produces in me. You can't see faith.

God can't. But faith is testified to be a living thing by its fruit. And as our Lord said, by their fruit ye shall know them.

So the scripture is fulfilled with Seth Abraham believed God, and it was imputed on him for righteousness, and he was called a friend of God. Now, what's the conclusion to this lesson drawn from Genesis 15 and 22? Verse 24 gives us the conclusion. You see, then, how that by works a man is justified, not by faith only.

His works did not save him. He was saved long before he produced the works, but his works proved the validity of his faith. Now, he's going to conclude with a fourth illustration, and he's using the harlot Rahab.

Rahab had heard the report of the promise God made to Israel that God was going to deliver the fortified city of Jericho into the hands of the Israelites. And instead of believing the military leaders in Jericho who said Israel can never conquer Jericho, she believed the promise of God to Israel that God was going to deliver her city into the hand of her own. She believed God.

How was Rahab saved? She believed God. What was the proof of the genuineness of her faith? When the spies came in, and it was known that there were men from the enemy camp, she hid them under the haystack. And when the people searching for the enemy had left, she took them out and said, You better get going and get back to camp because they are looking for your life.

The fruit of her faith was that she delivered the spies, gave them refuge, and sent them back in safety. She wasn't saved before God by her works. But what did her works prove? That what was called faith was genuine faith because faith is alive and always reproduces itself.

That which calls itself faith but never reproduces is dead, and that which is dead can never be called faith. So in verse 26, James for the fourth time draws a conclusion from his lesson. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

If the immaterial part of an individual leaves this body, this body is a corpse. It's not living. It's dead.

If that which calls itself faith that reproduces is gone, if there's no life in that which calls itself faith, it's a spiritual corpse and shouldn't be called faith at all. Now, I trust in this, you can see, that James is not teaching a doctrine that Paul contradicts. He's defining for us in very clear terms what faith is and how faith operates and how we can know that what we call faith is genuine faith.

And sometimes if you want to ponder the question, well, what is the biblical concept of faith? I suggest you come to James 2. You see, that faith is that attitude of utter dependence upon God that counts God's word as the word of a gentleman so that he will fulfill what he has promised. And that confidence in God which we call faith is a lie. And what is a lie will reproduce itself.

And the fruit of faith will be evident in the life of a child of God. Our Father, may this portion of the word be made living to us by the Spirit so that we might understand that James is not teaching a doctrine of salvation by work but is defining for us what faith is and showing us how faith operates so that we might produce the fruit of faith in our life. We pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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