

Called-Justified

by John Piper

John Piper explores the relationship between faith and works in the context of justification, reconciling the teachings of Paul and James.

Duration: 32:17

Scripture: Genesis 15:6, Romans 3:28, Romans 4:3-5, James 2:20-24

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Rewards In Heaven"

Description

In this sermon, Dr. Piper discusses the concept of rewards in heaven based on the degree of holiness achieved on earth. He emphasizes that this life is a preparation for eternity and that some people prepare themselves to be big lights while others prepare themselves to be little lights, depending on their delight in God's glory. He references Romans 4:4-5 to explain that justification is not achieved through works, but through faith in God. He also compares the definition of works in Paul's writings versus James' writings, highlighting that works for James are the fruit of faith, while works for Paul are what one does without faith.

Transcript

Now, I said that there would be time for questions tonight, and I would like to pose two, which will take a good bit of the time to answer, and then throw it open for you, and your questions can range over anything over the past three Sundays. My first question is, how can Romans 3.28 and 4.5 be made to harmonize with James 2.20-24? And I didn't raise that question this morning concerning the different ways that Paul and James speak of the appropriation of justification, but I want to raise it tonight because it's a classic problem, and you need to know how, at least I, see a solution. We'll look at Romans 3.28 first, and then we'll look at James 2, and we'll read these two texts, and see the conflict, and then see the possible resolution between them.

Romans 3.28, Paul says, "...for we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law." That's where the great Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone comes from, that is, apart from works of the law. Romans 4.4-5, "...now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift, but as his due. And to one who does not work, but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." So there again, notice, not work, see that? And to one who does not work, if you work, you're not justified.

This text says. Now, turn to James chapter 2. We'll read verses 20-24 of James chapter 2. Are you into this, Tom, on Sunday morning yet? Okay. Tom's teaching, Toshavim and his teams are studying James.

"...do you want to be shown, O foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?" You see that faith was active along with works and faith was completed by works. And the scripture was fulfilled, which says, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. And he was called a friend of God.

You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. And so Luther tossed it out of his New Testament. Not everything Luther did was good.

He put James and Hebrews and Revelation and second Peter and forget what else at the back and said, straw, not wood or straw, not stone, precious. Was he right to do that? Is James an epistle of straw because it doesn't drive Christ as he said? Well, I think there are ample clues, both in this context in James and in Paul, that though these two writers use drastically different ways of saying what they mean, they mean the same thing. And I hope I can show that without twisting these words all over the place inappropriately.

Let's take a few clues. Verse 19 in James 2 shows, I think, that James is standing against a view of a watered down faith, and he's trying to recover the radical dimension or nature of faith. Verse 19 says, you believe, you believe, that's faith.

You believe that God is one, you do well. Even the devils believe and shudder. Well, now, as soon as he starts talking like that, you can say to yourself, whoa, this is not the kind of faith Paul's talking about.

Devils have this faith? Yeah, James would say, they sure do. And they shudder. They got faith, but it doesn't save.

So that's your first clue. James is thinking in terms of a faith that devils can have. Okay? That should alert you right off the bat that devils believe and aren't saved.

And so, aha, clue number one, warning signal. Don't chalk this up to be equal with the faith of Paul, who would have never said that a devil could have faith. Because you can use the same word in two different ways.

We do that all the time. We shouldn't fault these writers for doing it. Second clue, verses 17 and 20 show that James is contending with a weak and empty view of faith, not with Paul's view.

Verse 17 says, so faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead. And verse 20 says, do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? Now, what do those two terms, dead and barren, signify? Well, they imply that the faith being spoken of hasn't produced anything. It's just powerless.

It's not real. It's not active. It's not living.

And hence, it doesn't have any works with it. If it were alive, if it were living faith, or what's the opposite of barren? Fruitful. If it were fruitful faith, it would produce some fruit.

It would get something done. And so, you can see in the connection between dead faith and no works, that really what he's against is a faith that is so nothing, it doesn't have any results in the life. And Paul's against that too, isn't he? In fact, I think Galatians 5, 6. Now, this is a key bridge, I think.

Galatians 5, 6 is the key bridge between Paul and James. If you want a bridge to walk over from Paul's faith apart from works to James justified by works and not by faith alone, there is a bridge that goes over

there, and it's Galatians 5, 6, which says, and this is given as a ground for our hope of righteousness, which is given as a ground for our justification. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail.

But what is of avail? What do your translations read? Mine says faith working through love. What do yours say? Anything different than that? I don't want to stumble over translations. I think that's the basic meaning.

So what avails? What would Paul say is the availing faith? Faith dash working dash through dash love. Boom, that's the term. Faith working itself out through love.

How is that different than James, what he's really after? Namely, a faith that isn't dead, but a faith that works. Now, we could complain all day long that James stuck, that he said it the way he said it. Justified by works.

Why did he say it that way? That's terrible. Well, let's think about why he might have said it that way. He uses Abraham as an example.

Genesis chapter 22. I'm going to read a section from Genesis 22, and I just noticed that I didn't write down the verses. So I'm going to look it up here.

Genesis 22. This is the place he's referring to where he offers Isaac. And I'm going to read verses 16 through 19.

Because what I want you to see is something in the context of Genesis 22, just after Abraham had offered his son Isaac, that causes James to look at that and say, hmm, so it was the act of obedience to which God gave the promise of life. Verses 16, following of Genesis 22. By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you.

Now notice, because you have done this. James saw that word because he said, hmm, because he did this? Because you have done this, I will bless you. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, as the sand which is on the seashore.

And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. And by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. Because, there it is again, because you have obeyed my voice.

Now, that promise is the same promise that was given in chapter 15, verses 1 to 6, to which it says, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness. Here, the same promise is repeated and given to him because he obeyed. Now James looks at that and he says, hmm, he gave it to him on the basis of faith the first time, and here he is believing that God is so faithful he could raise his son from the dead and thus following through obediently to kill him.

And because he did that, God follows through and gives him the promise which was originally made on the basis of justification. And James just, he just, he looks around at his community. Now, this is one of the most important things to realize.

James and Paul have different opponents. And how you express your theology is always deeply determined by whom you are talking to, especially those you are trying to correct. And what James sees all around him, probably are people who caught on a little bit to what Paul was saying and then went crazy

with it and said, you don't have to work, you don't have to obey, all you have to do is believe that God is one or believe that Jesus died or something.

Just believe and you're safe. And they were disobedient all over the place. Nobody was changed.

No lives were altered. And James is looking at these people and then he goes back and he looks at Abraham's life and he says, hmm, now Abraham believed God and it was reckoned him as righteousness. And then years later, he, in obedience to God, through faith, offers his son.

God withholds him and then says, because you've done this, I'm going to keep on going with my promise that was given to you in justification. And James simply says, you see, there's got to be obedience. It's got to be works because faith isn't real without it.

And he goes so far as to say the justification. Now, we got to think a minute here carefully. So we catch on to just what justified by works means.

Justified by faith means, I think, that faith is what makes it fitting for God to declare a person acquitted. Faith is what makes it fitting for God to declare a person acquitted in court. Now, you switch it over.

James looks at Abraham's obedience and he says, well, God looked at him and said, because you did this, I'm going ahead with my promise. And so he concluded the obedience of faith, which he calls works, makes it fitting for God to declare Abraham righteous. And that's all he means, I think, by justified by works.

This obedience that Abraham performed in pursuant of his own faith in God's ability to raise the dead was a demonstration of the faith's life and the faith's fruitfulness. And therefore, it too, as a witness to the reality of faith, makes it fitting for God to declare Abraham righteous. And the way James chooses to say that in a polemical situation, fighting against people who have abused the teaching of Paul, is Abraham was justified by works.

You know, and you can maybe feel him shiver when he says it, but you guys, you better realize that works are absolutely indispensable to demonstrate the reality of your faith or your faith isn't worth a toot and it's not going to get you to heaven at all. I think that's the context out of which this comes. And therefore, I don't think that the meaning, the conviction of James and Paul are in conflict because of that bridge in Galatians 5, 6. But one other problem might emerge if you go back to Romans 4, 5, you might say, well, wait a minute, Paul not only said we are justified apart from works, he said, if you work, you're not justified.

Now, to answer that, we have to do the same thing with Paul that we did with James. We have to look in the context and say, what did Paul mean by works? And he just defines it so wonderfully in verse 4 of chapter 4. How would you define works on the basis of verse 4 of chapter 4? Somebody do that for me. Working or doing works is, finish the sentence.

No, no, no, no. Verse 4. What is verse 4? Read me verse 4 in your Bible. We know you're looking at different Bibles.

Oh, you don't have it there. Yes, earning wages. That's works.

Earning wages. You see that in verse 4? It's so plain. He who works gets his wages according to what he's due.

That is works. That's not what James meant by works. Right? Works for James is the fruit of faith.

It's what you do when your faith is not dead, but alive. Works for Paul is what you do when you don't have faith. Faith is the very opposite of works for Paul.

Works is when you say, I'm not going to trust somebody to work for me. I'm going to work and earn my own wages. No welfare in my system.

And so when he gets to verse 5 and says, therefore, to him who trusts, but does not work, we shouldn't construe him to mean not obey. We should just construe him to mean not try to earn favor by working for God and get wages. Okay, that's my answer then.

That's my effort to try to see these two writers. And two things to learn from this difficulty. One, always make sure that you try to understand what a person means and not just what he says.

So important that we give each other the benefit of the doubt when we're talking with each other. Because I have said things over the last five years that just make some of your hairs curl about eternal security, for example. And when we talk for an hour, you say, oh, I didn't know that's what you meant.

Because it's more complex than we have often thought. And part of that point is we are often determined in the way we state our doctrine by whom we are trying to correct. Why am I down on self-esteem? Because this world is full of people who misuse the whole concept of self-esteem.

My whole last 10 years has been engaged in fighting against the concept of self-esteem. Well, I never would have dreamed of talking like that 20 years ago. But when it's all around you like a disease, you start talking that way.

So that determines, you see, what fills up the way you express your convictions. And the second thing to learn is that faith justifies and works, or obedience to God from faith, bears witness to the life and the reality of faith. So I don't want anybody to conclude from this morning's message or tonight that the radical gospel of justification on the occasion of faith somehow leads to antinomianism, that is lawlessness, or a freedom from a need to obey God.

In just the opposite way, as we'll see next week, it leads inevitably to a glorified personality. Now, one other question. This one won't take as long to answer.

My second question tonight is, are we justified by our initial act of genuine faith, or must we persevere in faith in order to be justified? That's my second question. Romans 5 chapter 1 says, therefore, having been, or since we are justified, we have, or let us have, peace with God, from which I think we must conclude justification is a present possession on the basis of faith that we have performed. It is not just a future thing we're waiting for and hoping that we will get if we persevere in faith.

It is, it is ours. We are now justified, innocent, not guilty, acquitted, the wrath averted. Now, it's ours.

And I tell you, that is so freeing to do battle with Satan when he comes in and tempts you to think that it's all over, to think that you're too bad. There are people in this church who think that they're too bad to be saved. And oh, I pray for those people that God would open their eyes to the meaning of justification.

But I wouldn't have posed it as a question if there weren't some other text that seemed to say something different. Jesus, for example, says, he who endures to the end will be saved. Surely he means he who

endures in faith to the end will be saved.

But the key issue comes from this whole illustration of Abraham. And I want to show you two things in Romans 4. Turn to Romans 4 with me. In Romans 4, chapter 3, verse 3, it says, For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Does anybody know what chapter and verse that's a quotation from the Old Testament of? 15, 6. Okay. Genesis 15, 6. Now, Abraham is about... I forget how old he is. It doesn't really matter.

God, in Genesis 15, 6, declares Abraham righteous, reckons him righteous, because he believes. He says, I'm going to make your descendants like the stars. Go out, look up the stars.

I'm going to do that. And it says, Abraham believed God, and God reckoned his faith as righteousness. Now, look at Romans 4, 18 to 22, and read very carefully.

And those of you who have read the Old Testament, who know your Old Testament well, try to think when this is referring to in Genesis. In hope, Abraham believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations. As he had been told, so shall your descendants be.

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead, because he was about a hundred years old. Or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb, no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God. But he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

And then here's a key logical connection. Your Bible may say, therefore, or it may say, that is why, like mine. It means the same thing.

That is why. Now, what's the that referring to? Or what's the truth from which he is inferring this next statement? Well, that he, when he was a hundred years old, grew strong in faith and gave glory to God, believing his promise. Therefore, his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Now, that's a reference to Abraham when he was a hundred years old, which shows that the time is Genesis 17. You can see that in Genesis 17, 17, where it says he's a hundred years old. It's the time when God came to him and told him that not Ishmael, who was then 13 years old, would be the heir, but Isaac would be born next year.

Thirteen years elapsed between Genesis 15, 6 and Genesis 17. When was he reckoned righteous? On the basis of the faith in Genesis 15, 6, did God declare him righteous? Or on the basis of the faith in Genesis 17, when he believed the word that next year his barren wife would have his own son. Was he reckoned righteous? And we could carry it one step farther and go to James.

And what's the situation in James where he is justified? It's at the death or at the sacrifice of his son Isaac, which is another 10 or 12 years. All right, 15, 6, 17, 22. Three different periods in Abraham's life.

In all three cases, God comes to him, according to Paul and James, and says on the basis of this faith, not that faith, this faith, you're righteous. Okay, that's why I raised the question. Do we get justified on the basis of persevering faith? Or do we get justified on the basis of our first act of saving faith so that we can say, I am now justified? Well, my answer is that we take the two teachings of Scripture and try to let them be coherent.

That is, 5.1 of Romans says we are justified because we believed. And these texts in 4.3 and 4.20 to 24 seem to suggest that justification is given on the basis of a faith that once was and then is again. And you could add James and it is again.

And here's the way I see them together. I think God justifies us on the basis of the first act of real faith. Because two things.

In it, he sees all the subsequent persevering acts of faith like a tree in an acorn. Because by his sovereign decree, he has established that those subsequent acts of faith will most certainly follow. And therefore, there's no inconsistency.

He does justify on the basis of the first acorn of faith. We could say mustard seed of faith. And he knows that that mustard seed has the whole big bush in it of all the other acts of faith that will come in the years to follow.

And he attends and has a view to that so that it's not inconsistent of him to say to that person who on a night finds Christ and puts his faith in him, justified. And then a year later, when that person in a great act of faith follows through with some difficult act of obedience and God comes to him and says, because you have done this in faith, I reckon you as righteous. And no inconsistency there because that faith is all one faith.

It all began in that seed. It's all created by God. It's all sustained and enabled by God.

God is not the least inconsistent to say that justification is a declaration to the one or to the other. I'm going to stop. And we have about 10 minutes for you to ask questions about this tonight or to raise questions about anything prior, Evie.

Let me try to remind everybody what you're referring to and see if I can remind myself. There was a sermon once upon a time in which I used an analogy that some people in heaven will be pen lights and some will be flashlights and some will be big strobe lights. Remember that? And in every case, you will be as bright as you can be.

Now, I think the context and the point of that illustration was to say that we will be rewarded. There will be true rewards in heaven for varying degrees of holiness in this earth. And that this earth is the preparation for eternity.

And some people prepare themselves to be big lights and some prepare themselves to be little lights in accord with the degree that they delight in God's glory. You gain in your ability to delight in God. Is there anybody in this room who could honestly say, for example, that uh today... No, that's a lousy question because some could.

I was going to say today you delight in God less than you did 10 years ago. I mean, for me, it's just it's not the case. But forget that question.

The truth is you can grow in your capacity to delight in God. And since you can, God's not going to be indifferent to that in the judgment day. If you have made for yourself a little cup, he'll fill that little cup for you.

And you'll just be bubbling over in heaven with your little cup. And if you made a big cup, he'll fill that that big cup. And if you made a big barrel, he'll fill that.

Everybody will be full to overflowing, happy as you can be in heaven. No frustrations. But there'll be different sized cups and different sized lights.

Now, the question, I suppose, is... I can't think what the question would be. What's the question? All right. Well, you have a choice at every area, OK? People always come back to me with language that I do not use and read it into what I say.

Never have I ever denied you have choice at any time in your life. The issue is, why do you choose what you choose? I've never denied that anybody has a choice whether to be saved or not, nor would I want to deny that anybody has a choice whether to be more sanctified or not. We all have those choices.

You face them every day. That's why I pleaded with people at the end of the service to turn. Didn't I say, turn, turn this morning? Did that sound like they had no choice? They've got a choice.

But when they choose, why did they choose what they chose? To whom will they give the glory for that ability to choose? Well, they'll give it to God for their salvation and, I believe, also for all the degrees of sanctification. So, yes, there's choice before and after conversion. And yes, there's a choice tonight, whether any of you will watch TV or read the Bible.

And I dare say that if you spend an hour reading the Bible, your cup will be bigger in eternity than if you watch TV. And it's your choice. Of course, when you get to heaven and you look back on tonight and you say, I chose to read the Bible.

You know what your next sentence will be? Praise God! Amen, man! That's right, because God is the one who put it within you. By the grace of God, I am what I am, Paul said. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, 10, I worked harder than any of those other apostles.

Then what did he say? Nevertheless, not I, but Christ within me. He's not going to take the glory for his sanctification or his labors. Boy, he's going to be smothered with crowns, that Apostle Paul.

And he's not going to take the credit for any of them. And I'll have my little cup and I won't take any credit for that either. This concludes Dr. Piper's message.

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