

## **James: Faith and Works**

### **August 16, 2020**

This lesson really comes to the heart of what James is writing about. “Faith without works is dead.” This isn’t just a Christian issue – it was an issue within Judaism too. By “faith,” James seems to mean an acceptance of monotheism – that there is one supreme God. But within Judaism, this was never enough – one must be obedient to the Law, and that requires various obligations, in short – works.

For a Jew, almsgiving was an essential point of righteousness. It was commanded. The collection of alms and distributing them to those in need was a regular activity in each Jewish community. This is in marked contrast to Greek and Roman views at the time. The Greek Stoics aimed for the complete absence of feeling. Pity was a disturbance of the philosophic calm in which they were seeking to live. Epictetus said that only he who disobeys the divine command will ever feel grief or pity. Virgil (the Roman) described the perfectly happy man as having no pity for the poor and no grief for the sorrowing; such emotions would only upset his own serenity. In contrast, for the Jew, and for the early Christians, one was to actively share in the misfortune of others. This was profoundly different from the pagan and gentile norms of the day. (Adapted from Barclay)

So, who does James write as saying one need only have faith and not “works”? James seems to be holding up the doctrine taught by Paul as inadequate. One can pick out verses here and there by Paul which, in isolation, might seem to support this. Consider Galatians 2:16: “... yet we know that a person is justified not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.” But, what James is arguing against, a “faith” barren of “works,” is not something Paul advocated. For example, in Romans 6:1-2 Paul rejects licentiousness – the idea that one can have “faith,” but still live a sinful life “in order that grace may abound”.

To put this in perspective, let’s take a look at the lives of these people supposedly putting their trust in “faith” alone. Let’s look at Paul. He was always traveling, here and there, to preach the gospel. He endured shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment. Yet, where he went, he did not accept pay, but earned his own way by his labor. Is this faith without works? I can’t think of anyone who could be said to have “out-worked” Paul. Yet, these “works” were a consequence of his faith, not a substitute for it. As he wrote to the Thessalonians (as inscribed on the

Pauline windows in our sanctuary), **“For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.”** Paul is citing what was done, not a barren faith.

Consider Martin Luther. It is he who was said James was an “epistle of straw” (somewhat out of context). Consider what Martin Luther did. He spoke out forcefully against the sale of indulgences. He stood up publicly to the power of the corrupt Catholic Church of his day. He established a Protestant denomination (the Lutheran Church). He translated the Bible into the language of his people (German). He wrote the hymn “A Mighty Fortress.” He in fact had works in abundance. This is not a life of “faith without works.”

That is not to say that, in the early church of Paul’s and James’s day, there were not Christians who heard what they wanted to hear, and chose “faith” and then did nothing more. It is against this posture that both Paul and James argue. We saw earlier that Paul condemns licentiousness, the continuing of evil works while pretending to have faith. For a different example, Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians writes against “idleness”, a lack of any work. It seems that some among the Christians in Thessalonica were content to live by their faith and not do any labor at all, even to support themselves, but instead lived off the resources of others. Paul condemns this, just as he does licentiousness.

**2 Thessalonians 3:6-13: Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This is not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.**

So, condemning “faith without works,” by James, is somewhat of a straw man set up to be knocked down, a characteristic of the “diatribe” form of argument. But

then, what about “works without faith?” Does James argue for that? No, he says, “I by my works will show you my faith.”

It is known that James the Just, Jesus’s brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church, was martyred in 62 A.D. (Josephus gives an account, as do some other sources.) He held to his faith and was condemned by the Sadducees and Pharisees, and thrown down from the Pinnacle of the Temple, then stoned when that did not kill him outright. Would a man without faith have stood up for the gospel of Jesus Christ like that? No, James lived out his faith.

In the parable of the Judgment of the Nations in, Jesus has the righteous reply, **Matthew 25:37-40** “**Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, and thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, and naked and gave you clothing? And when was it we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?**” **And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”**

What motivated these held as righteous to do what they did for “the least of these”? Was it not some kind of faith? Jesus is speaking to Jews here. It is faith in God, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that is assumed. These righteous have lived that faith in how they helped others.

What Jesus opposed was a narrow legalism that would measure “works” by a checklist according to a close reading of the law, while exploiting loopholes to serve self-interest. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”** In contrast, Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees:

**“The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ...”** (Matthew 23:2-5)

Here is faith (the scribes and Pharisees believe in the one God) without meaningful works. Jesus characterizes this as “unwilling to lift a finger,” despite all that the scribes and Pharisees do as a show of righteous works for others to see.

This is a temptation in our day too: to make a show of doing good things that don't require the investment of ourselves. The world has become adept at selling cheap "works" in the form of donations to worthy causes. Or, perhaps we may imagine that taking the political position of advocating that the government "do good" (with taxpayer money) on our behalf, or under our influence, earns us credit as good works. I recall from more than thirty years ago an organization soliciting for contributions at our church in Virginia. Contributions to the organization didn't go for food for the hungry overseas, but to lobby the government to spend resources on sending food to those in need overseas. The rationale was that there was more "leverage" this way – for a given donation, more money was sent to the destination. What donations would be purchasing was control over other people's money. Not long ago a President of Wilkes was very proud of all the good he had done for the campus using "other people's money," meaning various grants solicited from government or other funds.

In Jesus's parable, the righteous did not simply hire others to do the various good works for them. They didn't seek leverage. They simply acted themselves to meet a need. They were doers; they built the house of their faith upon rock.

So, returning to James after that long detour, we can find agreement with him. Of course works goes along with faith! Works within the power of the person of commitment, works that showed faith. For the thief on the cross, all he could do was to confess his sin and ask to be remembered. Jesus was satisfied with that. For most of us, there are more opportunities. We are not necessarily called to do everything – it's not a matter of checking off a list. Trust God to move your spirit when need arises. Pray and listen.

Now, let's take a look at those earlier verses in Chapter 2, which are an example of James's idea of works lived out.

**My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," or to the one who is poor say, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who**

**drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?**

**8 You do well if you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ....**

**13 For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:1-8, 13)**

So James, like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, calls us to a strict obedience. It is an obedience to the Law that Paul says we cannot bear; it convicts us of sin. But James agrees with Paul in our depending ultimately on God’s mercy. We will make mistakes; we will fall short of the mark, we all sin. But thanks be to God, that forgiveness is ours by the saving grace of Jesus Christ, who died that we all might live, and rose as a sure sign of God’s ultimate purpose for us. We live by faith. May the works of our faith bless others, even as we have been blessed.

Cindy writes: I have a problem with this passage in James. “Faith without works is dead.” The whole message that God and Jesus gives us is that we cannot “buy” salvation. Salvation is a gift from God who created us. “It is He that has made us, and not we ourselves.” Our faith in God is the most important thing of all. Without it, where are we? I think John’s mother Ruth would say that works is an “outward sign” of our faith. When I asked her why so many churches (denominations) insisted that people had to do or not do so many different things to be a Christian or to be saved, she said that all those are outward signs. We are Christians because of our belief in Jesus Christ, his love and the way he lived. The way he lived and what he taught makes us want to follow Him in works. God gives us salvation by His love through Jesus Christ.

I think this is so important to me because of a statement someone made in a group I was part of discussing Christianity. Someone said, “You can’t be a Christian without doing good works.” I was reminded of a story that a woman minister, a friend, told me. She regularly visited a woman who never went outside her home. The woman was covered with psoriasis and thought she looked dreadful. She couldn’t bring herself to be seen by anyone else. The woman said she missed Communion, so my friend, Eileen, took communion to her. That woman’s faith was important to her, and being a Christian was important to her. I have known of others throughout my whole life who for one reason or another couldn’t do “works” but were still devoted Christians with tremendous faith.

*Prayer: Holy God, as we search our minds and hearts, may we also search our gifts and skills for serving you and find opportunities to put faith into action. Amen.*