

Justification in James chapter two

While Paul teaches very clearly and emphatically that justification is by faith alone, without works, James seems to be saying, just as clearly and emphatically, that faith is not enough. He declares a man must be justified by works. Is James really contradicting what Paul has to say on the subject? If not, then what is the truth James is presenting in this passage of Scripture?

THE PRACTICAL APPROACH

One very important point James makes, almost in passing, is that what a man believes is critical to justification (James 2:19). While it is true, and important, that "God is one," believing this does not bring about justification, even if the faith is as real as that of the angels on the matter. A man may believe a host of truths found in Scripture, but (today) if he does not believe Christ died for his sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3, 4) he is not justified before God. That, and that alone, is the gospel by which we are saved (1 Cor. 15:2).

However, his most obvious argument is that words mean little if they do not represent reality. God can see the heart and hence, without consideration of our subsequent life, "The Lord **knows** them that are His." But we cannot see the heart. Before **we** can know a man's faith is real we must see evidence of it in his life. Therefore, as Paul continues, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord [who professes faith] depart from iniquity" -- so that men also may know they are His (2 Tim. 2:19).

It is not modern-day "easy-believism" James decries, it is old-fashioned "make-believism." James is not saying works are necessary to supplement faith, but that they are the only indication **we** have of the reality of that faith. True faith is sufficient -- no works are needed to prop it up. Paul is very clear on this. Also, true faith is not "easy." It is not easy to come to the place where one recognizes his total spiritual bankruptcy and casts himself in abject helplessness on the work of Christ alone. The flesh will resist this to the bitter end. But anything short of this is not true faith.

Paul, in Romans 4:1 - 5, as well as in many other passages, is concerned with justification before God. While this is his emphasis, he does leave room for justification before men as well. In Romans 4:2 he states, "For if Abraham were justified by works, **he hath whereof to glory, but not before God.**" Here justification before men is implied but not stated or developed -- for that is not Paul's subject.

There must be a fitting response in the life to the message received from God if faith is to be demonstrated before men. Noah was warned of the coming judgment and began to work -- busy doing what God had told him to do, building the ark. Who would have been convinced that Noah really believed a flood was coming if he had remodeled his home instead of building the ark?

The message we have received is that the judgment, for the believer, is already past -- at Calvary (Rom. 8:1) -- and that we must cease from our own works (Heb. 4:10). It is to the one

that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly" whose faith is counted unto him for righteousness (Rom. 4:5). The fitting response to this message, and the initial proof of our faith, is that we cease working (for justification). Who will be convinced we believe we are saved by faith without works if we continue to work for our salvation? However, further evidence that our faith is real should follow as we walk in the Spirit, and God's creative and powerful hand is seen working in and through us (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:13).

It has always been true that justification before God is by faith apart from works. It is Paul, however, as the apostle of grace in this age of grace, who makes this crystal clear, and who is given the privilege of emphasizing it. "By the deeds of the Law there shall NO flesh be justified" Paul tells us in Romans 3:20. That this principle is true for both Old and New Testaments is certain from Romans four. Salvation (justification) was by faith without works both before the Law was given (Abraham -- Rom. 4:1 - 3) and under the Law (David -- Rom. 4:6 - 8). Of course this principle continues in this age of grace as well (Eph. 2:8, 9).

James does not deny this. He is, rather, pointing out that mere profession is not faith, and profession cannot save anyone.

Paul does not ignore the fact that real faith results in visible evidences, but insists it is the faith, not the evidence flowing from it, which justifies. While James wants to see a general "life-style" consistent with true faith before he accepts it as valid (James 2:18), Paul is much more specific. He makes a clear distinction between works selected in the wisdom of the flesh and carried out in the energy of the flesh¹ on the one hand, and those good works "which God hath before ordained that we should walk in THEM" (Eph. 2:10) on the other.

Righteousness -- what kind? It will help to see there are three basic categories of righteousness discussed in the word of God.

There is **SELF**-righteousness -- which, though always falling short of perfection (Rom. 3:23), is possible, in some measure at least, to those dead in sins. But it is "iniquity" (Matt. 7:23), for "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). It is as "filthy rags" in the sight of God (Isa. 64:6), though it may appear as "wonderful works" to those producing it (Matt. 7:22). It results in the second death and eternal separation from God if persisted in (Matt. 7:22, 23). It is the kind of righteousness sought by the leaders of Israel in Paul's day (Rom. 10:1). Their need was not merely more of the righteousness they were already pursuing, but a different kind of righteousness altogether. This is what Christ had in mind when He said, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). What they needed is specified in Matt. 6:33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and HIS righteousness."

What Christ said in Matt. 5:20 is made very clear in Romans 9:30 and 10:3, 4. Those addressed needed **IMPUTED** righteousness. This has nothing to do with life style. Instead, it is the very righteousness of God Himself put to the account of the one who believes the gospel. God can, in all justice, offer this to us because Christ became sin for us and paid for those sins at

¹ These are called "dead works" in Heb. 6:1; 9:14; "works of the Law" in Rom. 9:32; Gal. 3:2, etc.; "works of righteousness" in Titus 3:5; and our "own works" in Heb. 4:10.

Calvary (2 Cor. 5:21). It becomes ours when we believe (Rom. 10:4). This is the only righteousness God considers when our justification is in view. It results in forgiveness, eternal life and, for His heavenly people, a home in heaven with Him.

For the believer, God has also provided **ENGENDERED righteousness**. The dictionary definition of the word "engender" reads, "1. Beget, procreate 2. **To cause to exist or to develop: produce: to assume form: originate.**"

Engendered righteousness is that quality of life and service produced in us by God Himself, working through His Spirit and His word. In this we are His workmanship and creation (Eph. 2:10), for it is God who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13 -- see also Heb. 13:20, 21). As we walk in the Spirit and allow God to work in us we can say with Paul, "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Engendered righteousness leads to joy, blessing and fruitfulness now, and rewards in glory.

Why do believers have so much trouble living the Christian life?

Understandably, those whose "faith" is mere profession, and are not believers in the true sense, cannot live the Christian life -- for they are still "in the flesh" (Rom. 8:8). Though the believer is not "in the flesh" (Rom. 8:9) he all too often walks "after the flesh" (Rom. 8:5) rather than walking "after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4). Sadly, this walk "after the flesh" includes much that the believer tries to do in his very efforts to please God. He is much like a workman sweating away with a hand shovel and ignoring the bulldozer available at his side -- unused. This leads to frustration.

Much of the frustration occurs because they are ignorant of engendered righteousness. When they came to Christ they turned from self-righteousness, realizing they could not please God in this way, and availed themselves of imputed righteousness. If they have not done this they are not yet saved. Now, however, they think they are expected to go back to self-righteousness in order to please God. "I could not do it before, but now that I am saved and have the Holy Spirit living in me, I can do it!" is their thinking.

Before we were saved we thought we had to work to be saved. We had "the cart before the horse." It is not enough, however, to get the cart in its proper place, with works following salvation instead of preceding it -- we need a new cart, a different kind of works. We cannot please God by the works of the flesh after we are saved any more than we could before. "Are ye so foolish?" Paul asks the believers in Galatia, "having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect [sanctified] by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3).

This same idea is expressed in Hebrews 9:14. Those who need their consciences purged from dead works to serve the living God are believers! The "dead works" are not, necessarily, evil works, but may be "good works" produced in the flesh.

Paul's frustration.

Paul's struggle in Rom. 7:6 - 25 is not a record of his experience as an unbeliever, leading him to Christ. It is in the wrong part of Romans for that. Salvation is the topic of the first five chapters of Romans. This section, chapters six through eight, has sanctification in view. Also, Paul was neither "alive" nor "without the Law" as an unbeliever. He was dead in sin, and had been brought up under the Law in his home and instructed in the Law at the feet of Gamaliel.

It was at Paul's conversion, when he received eternal life, that he became **alive**. And, since keeping the Law had not one thing to do with that conversion, for a time he was "alive **without the Law**" (Rom. 7:9). Then he began to face the problem of how to live this new life so freely given to him. His background as a Pharisee, and training at the feet of Gamaliel, led him to the Law as a "rule of life" -- a means of sanctification.

At this point Paul himself, having begun in the Spirit, was seeking perfection by the flesh (compare Gal. 3:3). He found by bitter experience that in his flesh there was **nothing** good (Rom. 7:18), that it is not subject to the Law of God and thus cannot please Him (Rom. 7:7, 8). He realized that God had no plan to control, improve, or sanctify the flesh: that God's only plan for the flesh was death: that it had been crucified positionally at the Cross (Rom. 6:6) and needed to be accounted dead daily in experience (Rom. 6:11).

Deliverance (from the living death of longing desperately to do the will of God without the ability to carry it out) came not from greater dedication and more will power, but through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. He learned the futility of trying to please God through self-righteousness and began to experience and enjoy engendered righteousness.

But how could this physical body -- so closely linked to the fleshly nature, the source of many of its temptations and the all too willing servant in carrying out its desires, this "body of death" (Rom. 7:24 -- NASB) -- be a fitting tool to serve God? Paul tells us that God can give life now to our mortal (alive but subject to death) body, for the same Holy Spirit through Whom God raised Christ from physical death dwells in us (Rom. 8:11).

This same thought is found in Philipians. The "out-resurrection from among the dead" (Phil. 3:11 -- Wuest) does not have our physical resurrection in view any more than "being made conformable to His death" (Phil. 3:10) refers to our dying physically. Paul was not longing to attain to physical resurrection. He had not even died yet, and could not be **sure**, at this point, that he would **ever** die physically ("**WE** which are alive and remain" -- 1 Thess. 4:17 -- and "**WE** shall not all sleep" -- 1 Cor. 15:51). Believers do not "attain to" physical resurrection. All believers who die will be raised.

Paul is saying to the Philipians, "Accounting myself dead unto sin, I want to have a resurrection type life here and now so none can think I, as so many around me, am still dead in sin."

He had brought this topic up before. He told the believers in Rome, "Put yourselves once and for all at the service of God as those who are living ones out from among the dead" (Rom.

6:13 -- Wuest), and reminded them that "It is high time to awake out of sleep" (Rom. 13:11). He challenged the Corinthians to "awake to righteousness and sin not" (1 Cor. 15:34) and instructed the Ephesians with the call, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph. 5:14). See also Rom. 8:13; 2 Cor. 4:11; Eph. 1:19, 20; 1 Thess. 5:6.

A friend of mine was a medical choresman during World War Two. He tells of a time when so many casualties were coming into his field hospital that the choresmen were working day and night to minister to them. Those patients who did not survive were laid out on cots in a special tent and covered with blankets until a burial detail could be arranged. When his services were not needed for a while he would lie down on one of the cots, draw a blanket over him, and be instantly in a deep sleep. No one could tell that he was not one of the corpses. But when the doctor came in and gave a shout he would "rise up from among the dead ones" and get to work. Paul shouts to us, "Rise up from among the dead ones that all may see you are alive!" Only then can we lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of us (Phil. 3:12 -- NASB).

Summarizing the practical teaching of James chapter two:

- The message believed is vital. That God is one is true and basic to the character of God, but it is not the gospel (v. 19).
- Justification before men necessitates evidence men can see. "Show me," "I will show you" (v. 18).
- Faith without works, as far as men can see, is mere profession (v. 18).
- Profession is not faith.
 - * It cannot save. "Can that faith save him?" (v. 14 -- NASB).
 - * It does not justify man (v. 24).
 - * "Faith without works is useless" (v. 20 -- NASB).

THE DISPENSATIONAL PLACE OF JAMES

We will approach this topic from the viewpoint that the Body of Christ began with Paul before he wrote his first epistle. Establishing this premise is the work of other writings. In addition, though we cannot be dogmatic here, it is assumed that the Body began with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus and that those saved before that time were not taken into the Body, but continued their relationship to the kingdom program and retained their kingdom hope. Their presence following the beginning of the Body church -- until, one by one, they went to be with the Lord -- is one of the considerations necessitating a transition period. While much of what follows holds true even if the positions stated above are not taken, they do, in the estimation of the writer at least, clarify the dispensational place of James -- and the rest of the General epistles as well. ²

James addresses the believing Jews of the dispersion specifically (1:1). With this in mind, what may we learn concerning the contents of this book?

There is no mention of the Body of Christ, nor of any of the truths peculiar to the age of grace, in James. While this, in itself, does not prove that those addressed are not in that Body, it

²See the author's Bible Study # 66 entitled "A Short Introduction To First Peter."

does remove what could be a fatal objection to that view.

The expectation of those addressed was the kingdom (2:5), and the coming of the Lord as Judge (5:8, 9).

The Law is given a place and an emphasis foreign to Paul's writings. The "Law of liberty" (2:12) by which they will be judged (2:9, 10, 12) is the Ten Commandments (2:11). This fits with the zeal for the Law among the believers in Jerusalem. The writer of this book is the same James who boasted, "Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the Law" (Acts 21:20). This does not fit with Paul's emphasis in Galatians and his statement, "Ye are not under the Law" (Rom. 6:15).

It seems clear that James is not addressing these Jews as members of the Body of Christ, but as a remnant in Israel.

There are indications elsewhere that Israel as a nation still has a relationship to the Law not shared by the Body of Christ:

Galatians

Galatians was not written to believing Jews, as such, but to Gentiles and those Jews who were members of the Body of Christ. The latter, though still Jews by birth and nationality, were not looked upon as Jews spiritually or religiously for in the Body "there is neither Jew nor Greek" -- they were "all one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28).

In Galatians a distinction is made between circumcision and uncircumcision -- with the gospel adapted to the one under Peter and to the other under Paul (Gal. 2:7 - 9). In light of this, Peter addressed both of his letters to the dispersed Jewish believers (1 Pet. 1:1 & 2 Pet. 3:1).

The agreement for Peter to go to the circumcision and Paul to the heathen (Gal. 2:9) involved more than where and to whom they would minister. It involved two different messages.³ While both were to preach the same basic salvation message (Gal. 1:8, 9 with Acts 15:11), that message was adapted to the circumcision by Peter and to the Body of Christ (the "uncircumcision") by Paul.

If this agreement were only a matter of to whom they were to preach, Paul never kept it, for he consistently went to the Jews first through the rest of the book of Acts. If the message was to be the same, the agreement was not observed either. At the same time Paul was teaching we are not under Law (Rom. 6:15) and that if a believer is circumcised Christ profits him nothing (Gal. 5:2), James was proud of those under his ministry because they were zealous for the Law and strongly implied that they were still practicing circumcision (Acts. 21:21). Paul evidently saw no problem with these differences.

Revelation

³See the author's Bible Study # 65 entitled "Peter and Paul's agreement in Galatians two."

The believing remnant (probably the 144,000 witnesses of chapters seven and fourteen) "**keep the commandments of God** and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17).

Those who refuse the mark of the beast because they are "saints" are able to persevere, and "Here is the perseverance of the saints who **keep the commandments of God** and their faith in Jesus (Rev. 14:12). Later, in victory, they sing, "The song of **Moses . . . and the Lamb**" (Rev. 15:3).

Hebrews

In Hebrews chapter eight reference is made back to Jeremiah thirty one. An essential part of the New Covenant is that all Israel will be saved (Heb. 8:11). This will not come to pass until Christ comes in glory. In view of this, for Israel as a nation, the Old Covenant has not yet been replaced, but is "**ready to disappear**" (Heb. 8:13 -- NASB).

Other passages

Matt. 24:20 indicates that Israel will still be keeping the Sabbath during the Tribulation.

In Isa. 66:17, describing the Tribulation period, the dietary restrictions of the Law will still be in force, for the rebels (evidently Jews, for Gentiles were never given these dietary rules) will be judged for eating unclean meats (compare Isa. 65:4 also).

It may be concluded that James was writing to the believing remnant of Israel, not to the Body of Christ. Like the other General Epistles, his book not only ministered to the Jewish believers of his day, but will meet a real need for specific guidance and comfort for the remnant during the Tribulation as well.

This is not to say that there is not truth for us in James and the other General Epistles. They are rich in "horizontal truth," and even those passages which do not apply directly to us in the age of grace afford us a great deal of valuable instruction. They are blessedly for us though not written to us.

James chapter two

The justification of Abraham related by James took place an estimated forty years or so after he had been justified by faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1 - 4). Had he been unsaved (not justified before God) all that time, awaiting the works of James 2:21?

Paul, in this very context, notes that the time element is very significant. Because the earlier justification happened before he was circumcised, it was not for the circumcision only, but for all who believe (Rom. 4:10, 11). Since his justification by works was after his circumcision, there is no such proof that the justification listed by James is intended for other than Israelites.

While the practical principle that works constitute a justification before men (as discussed previously) still holds good, and seems to be the only principle illustrated by Rahab, there is

something deeper involved with Abraham.

When he offered Isaac there were no other human witnesses. The place for the offering was still in the distance (Gen. 22:4) when those accompanying them were left behind (Gen. 22:5, 6). When he returned with Isaac alive the natural assumption by the companions, if indeed they knew what was supposed to have taken place, would be that Abraham had "chickened out" and made up a "cover story." Thus his obedience would not have been apparent to men.

Not only this, but the Angel of the Lord specifically said, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me (Gen. 22:12). Abraham was not offering Isaac to a mere angel, but to the "angel of the Lord" – the pre-incarnate Christ Himself! His justification was, in some sense, before God!

Because Abraham had a covenant relationship to God did God expect a demonstration of faith which He does not expect from those today who come, apart from a covenant, as helpless, hopeless sinners? Is this the case also with Jews saved under the prophetic program? It is worthy of thought.

THE TYPOLOGY IN THE JUSTIFICATION OF ABRAHAM

It is significant that out of the many instances of faith on the part of Abraham both Romans four and James two zero in on times when he specifically believed God could bring forth life out of death.

Abraham had exercised faith back in Ur of the Chaldees (Heb. 11:8), but it was when he believed God would give him a son that it was said, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3). Much later, when he was ninety nine years old and Sarah was eighty nine, Abraham was specifically told, what before he had surely assumed, that the son would be born to his barren wife (Gen. 17:16 - 19). By this time the faith expressed earlier has been stretched to encompass an even greater impossibility. The life given to Isaac must be brought forth out of death. Abraham, Paul tells us, "without becoming weak in faith . . . considered his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb;" and "with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God . . . being fully assured that what He had promised [some fifteen years or so before] He was able also to perform) Rom. 4:19 - 21--NASB).

This instance of Abraham's faith points ahead, typically, to the incarnation, when the God who had brought about the miraculous birth of Isaac, the "only begotten son" of Abraham (Heb. 11:17), would even more miraculously bring forth His own only begotten Son from the virgin womb of Mary.

The importance and significance of the incarnation has been largely pushed into the background by the sentimental consideration of that birth, and somewhat overshadowed by the contemplation of His death and resurrection.

The importance of the birth of Christ is clear from the place it occupies in Scripture. It would be the Son given, the child born, upon whose shoulders the government would rest, who would sit on the throne of David forever (Isa. 9:6, 7). All the promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David that the Messiah would be their descendent could only be fulfilled through the incarnation. When it took place Mary, Elizabeth, Zacharias, Simeon and Anna prophesied; angels broke into song; the heavens produced a guiding star, and wise men traveled from far away to worship. God had, in gracious condescension, become man (1 Tim. 3:16; Phil. 2:6, 7; Heb. 2:14, 16). Man at last had the true and only "image of God" (Col. 1:15) -- a living and satisfying "image" -- whom they were free to worship. They were able to see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in His face (2 Cor. 4:6) as the radiance of the Father's glory shown forth in Him (Heb. 1:3 --NASB). They finally had One who would one day be a merciful and faithful high priest. Because of the humanity gained at the incarnation, and because He had been tempted in all points as they were, apart from sin, He would be able to come to their aid when they are tempted (Heb. 2:17, 18; 4:15).

Yet for all the glory and significance of the incarnation there would be no salvation apart from His death and resurrection. The great over-riding purpose of the incarnation, that which made it essential, was that He might die for our sins and be raised to be our living Savior. We must, indeed, have faith in the incarnation -- recognizing who He IS. He warned His listeners, "Unless you believe that **I AM** (see the same expression in John 8:58; 18:6 and the name of God given in Ex. 3:14) you shall die in your sins" (John 8:24). Yet, God-man that He is, He could not have saved even one soul if He had not died and been raised from the dead.

So Abraham's faith looking forward to the incarnation was, typically, incomplete. When that faith was extended to incorporate Calvary and the empty tomb, it was made perfect -- complete -- because it set forth the complete type.

The offering of Isaac was not the first time, nor was it the last, that Abraham had been justified before men by his works -- but this instance was chosen above the previous ones because it was the most outstanding evidence, the acid test, of the reality of his faith. Typically, it was chosen by the Holy Spirit to indicate that the object of our faith is not only who Christ **IS** (the incarnation), but what He **DID** (Calvary and the empty tomb). Any faith today -- real though it may be -- which does not extend to the death and resurrection of Christ is incomplete and leaves one still lost.

Do we believe, really believe, that God is one -- or any number of other scriptural truths? Great! But if we do not believe that "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4) even **REAL** faith will not save us! Faith is not perfected only when it is **genuine**, but when its **object** is the **Christ of Calvary**.

Thus James does not contradict Paul and, in the typology of the passage, gloriously supplements him. The instructions given in 2 Tim. 2:15 prove their worth once again!

--- William P. Heath.

Bible Study # 71.

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