

James 2:14-26, No. 8**“Justified by Works and Not by Faith Alone”****December 27, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We’ve been away from James for a month, what with *Messiah*, an Advent sermon from Revelation 12, and the Sunday School Christmas Program. But it isn’t necessary to review before proceeding, as is so often the case when we take up a text again after an interruption. In those cases the context is essential to right understanding, but not so much in wisdom literature. Just as you don’t need to remember which two proverbs preceded the one you are now considering, so you don’t need to consider what James has just said before considering what he says next. James is wisdom literature, the New Testament’s only specimen of the art, and its teaching is not obviously sequential in the way most of biblical literature is. The paragraph we are about to read, so far as any scholar can tell, might have been placed anywhere in the letter. James knew why he put things in the order he did, but we don’t.

I am going to comment extensively on the text as we read it because it is a passage of immense importance and, alas, of longstanding controversy. It is necessary, in other words, that we take care to understand what James is actually saying. There have been many disagreements about what James is actually saying, even among protestant evangelical Christians.

Text Comment

v.14 The viewpoint that James is describing in the history of Christian theology bears the name *antinomianism*. [“anti” against, *nomos*, the law; against-the-lawism. Actually, it means anti-having-to-obey-the law-ism.] Someone who says this is a professing Christian – he says he has faith and, in this context, that obviously means faith in Jesus – but he is not living for Jesus; he is not keeping the Lord’s commandments; he is not performing the good works that Paul teaches Jesus died to make us zealous to perform. James will use several examples to describe the good works he means, and together they amount to a description of obedience to any and all the commandments of God. Actually, to be more precise, an antinomian may *be keeping* the commandments and *doing* good works but he doesn’t think he *has to*. Many antinomians in history have actually been earnest and faithful Christians who lived exemplary lives, complicating the picture somewhat. Life and theology are often messy! If all antinomians lived disreputable lives, it would be much easier to describe the difference antinomianism makes! “See that disgusting person over there? He’s antinomian; you don’t want to be that.”

Antinomianism, in all its forms, is the view that saving faith in Jesus can exist without obedience to him, justification can occur without sanctification, forgiveness can be granted by God without the transformation of life. Antinomians typically maintain that here in James 2:14-26, we are being taught only that the professing Christian who does not live the Christian life will lose greater measures of God’s blessing, not that he will not be saved at all. [cf. Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 138] Antinomian views have appeared and reappeared throughout Christian history and have reappeared in our own time. New scholarship on the Westminster Assembly, the theological body that in the

mid-17th-century produced our *Westminster Confession of Faith*, suggests that the greatest concern looming over the Assembly as it prepared the *Confession* was not Roman Catholicism. Nor was it Arminianism. It was antinomianism. [R. Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 61 *passim*.] Some of you will remember the flap in the 1980s between the popular Reformed Baptist preacher John MacArthur and the Dallas Seminary professor Zane Hodges. MacArthur attacked the antinomianism then current in many Arminian Baptist circles in his book *The Gospel of Jesus*, and Hodges defended it in his book *Absolutely Free*. There has been more than a whiff of antinomianism in Reformed and Presbyterian circles recently. The idea that Christ has so fulfilled the law on our behalf that we are under no absolute necessity to keep the commandments – that is, you must keep the law or else – has, understandably enough, always had an attraction for believers. No serious antinomian would ever describe his viewpoint in such a cavalier way, but the wit's lines – “Freed from the law, O blessed condition; I can sin as I want and still have remission.” – comes perilously close to identifying the temptation of antinomianism through the ages.

I won't take more time to demonstrate that fact to you, but I hope I've said enough to remind you that what James is discussing in the verses we are reading is of timeless relevance and importance. We are, you and I, repeatedly tempted to make the very mistake, the error that James is warning us against here. Antinomianism is, as a matter of fact, disproved in a hundred different ways in biblical teaching, which perhaps explains why no theologian who is or has been considered to be a doctor of the Christian church has ever considered antinomianism to be the teaching of the Word of God. You know very well that Jesus threatened with rejection from heaven those who did not *do the will* of the Father in heaven. It was Jesus who said that if we *loved* him we would keep his commandments and Paul who wrote that there was a curse resting on all those who did not *love* the Lord Jesus. There isn't a book of the Bible that doesn't impress upon us the necessity of our obeying the commandments of God if we are to be numbered among his people.

Here James begins with that very question: can faith that is not accompanied by works (he means works of obedience to God's commandments) *save* anyone? The question is rhetorical and the answer is, of course, “No!” Zane Hodges, as a consistent antinomian, cannot allow James to be talking about salvation from sin and death here. He argues rather than the word “save” here must mean only deliverance from some earthly trial – a meaning the word has in 5:15 – but not at all likely its meaning here, as is indicated not only by the fact that James' subject here is justification or righteousness before God but by the use of the word elsewhere in James, as in 1:21 where the reference is to the salvation of the soul, 4:12 where the reference is to God as Savior from judgment, and 5:20 where again the reference is to the salvation of the soul. [Cf. Moo, 123-124] The faith that cannot save you *is precisely that faith*, that is, faith without or not accompanied by good works. That is the obvious implication of James' words “if someone *says* he has faith.” The man is claiming to have faith, but such a faith is not the genuine article. It is not the real thing. It is not faith at all, “for real faith unites a man with Christ so that his thoughts and actions come under the control of His Spirit.” Faith without works is a spurious faith. [Tasker, 63]

- v.17 The Greek term translated “naked” here is also used in the New Testament to describe someone who is inadequately or only partially clothed.

The fact that this is the second time James uses an illustration of the mistreatment of the poor and needy (cf. 2:2-3) suggests that he knew this to be a real problem in this early Christian community. James’ illustration is clear enough, but precisely how does it relate to dead *faith*? Well the point seems to be that once again the words are pious but they are not backed up by behavior that demonstrates their sincerity. “Go in peace,” suggests a prayer for God’s blessing and “be warmed and filled,” again suggests a hope that God would make up their obvious need. *The believer is talking like a Christian but he isn’t acting like one*. As one commentator beautifully puts it, “faith...has...in itself, as an integral element in its composition, the power and the desire to meet the infinite pathos of human life with something of the infinite pity which God has shown to man in Jesus Christ...” [Tasker, 64]

The problem with this sort of faith – the faith that talks but does not act – is that it is “by itself.” Faith that is without works is not faith at all. And that leads to the often repeated adage in protestant theology: “We are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.” True, authentic faith will be, must be accompanied by works. In his *Introduction to Romans*, Luther stated that saving faith is, “a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn’t stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever...Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!”

- v.18 As you may know, ancient Greek writing did not employ quotation marks. So there is a longstanding debate about what the next few verses mean, in part because one has to decide where the quotation marks go. I won’t bore you with the details, except to say that there are good reasons to favor the ESV’s decision to put them where they are. The point seems to be that some hypothetical opponent of James’ viewpoint is asserting that one person may choose faith, another may choose action. Faith and works are separate things and one needn’t have both to be saved. They are something like the various gifts that Paul says the Holy Spirit distributes among the people of God.

And James’ reply, which is the rest of v. 18, amounts to his rejection of this view of things. There can be no dichotomy between faith and works, he says, and so he challenges the imaginary objector to produce, if he can, an example of real faith that does not express itself in obedience and service. [Tasker, 66] No, says James, faith and works are always found together; they are two sides of the same coin, as it were. He himself would have no difficulty demonstrating his faith from his life. [Moo, 130]

- v.19 James is still addressing the imaginary objector who thinks he can have true faith without obedience and a spirit of Christian service. James proceeds, as any good arguer does, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of the person’s position. A faith without deeds amounts to a

merely verbal or intellectual agreement; it doesn't change one's way of life. *But the demons have that kind of faith!* They're certainly not saved. You believe that there is but one God. Good! But so do the demons. It is a good thing to have an accurate theology, but it matters not if the theology does not penetrate the motives and commitments of one's life. We learn in the Gospels that the demons knew very well that Jesus was the Messiah, far better than anyone else in the country did at the time. They even knew that he was Lord. Genuinely evil persons and demons can know the right things about God. But such knowledge is hardly saving faith. "The demons perfectly illustrate the poverty of verbal profession in and of itself." [Moo, 131]

v.20 But, for a Christian, the bottom line is the teaching of Holy Scripture. So James now proceeds to demonstrate from the Bible that true faith is always a working faith.

v.21 It is James' statement in v. 21 (with its parallel in v. 24) that has created all the problems. Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith and here James says that he was justified by works. It is worth remembering that if James were the first book of the NT to be written, which seems likely, perhaps in the mid-40s of the first century, he wrote before Paul had written his polemic against works righteousness in Galatians, even before the Jerusalem synod, of which we read in Acts 15, had met to discuss this very issue, how obedience fits into the justification of sinners. So James is hardly taking issue with Paul. He would not at this point have known how Paul would frame the issue or how he would use the terms James uses here.

For example, James could be using the term "justify" in a very different sense than Paul would later use it in Galatians and Romans. The word can be used, and is used in the NT to mean "to demonstrate to be right" or "to vindicate" or "to prove valid." For example, in Matthew 11:19 we read "Wisdom is *justified or proved right* by her actions." That is, the integrity or value of wisdom is demonstrated by the actions that flow from it. Many have thought this to be the simple solution to the problem of an apparent contradiction between James and Paul. They are using the word "justify" in two different ways, both of which ways are found elsewhere in the New Testament.

v.22 I rarely need to suggest a correction to a translation in the ESV, but what James wrote literally is: "You see that faith was working together with his works..." Again, the point is that the works of a believer are the works that faith itself originates." They don't come from nowhere, these acts of obedience in a Christian's life; they come from faith. Or, we may put it this way: faith achieves its goal when a believer does what God commands him or her to do.

In any case, his point, the point with which he concludes our v. 22 is that faith is completed by works, the works of love and obedience are the activity of genuine faith. In other words, true faith is not "by itself" as he put it in v. 17. His interest obviously is in continuing to prove that true faith is something much more than mere intellectual assent or agreement with theological propositions.

- v.23 However one approaches the problem of reconciling James and Paul, James makes it clear that he is not denying the centrality of faith, rather he is simply pointing out that what he has already said – viz. that *true faith invariably and in the nature of the case is a working faith* – is proved to have been true in Abraham’s case. He cites the same verse from Gen. 15 that Paul will cite in making his point that justification is by faith and not by works, though works of course in Paul’s polemic are the works of the law performed by someone who still imagines that he can *earn* his righteousness with God. Of course, Paul will likewise teach that true and living faith will always be a working faith.
- v.24 James has told us throughout the section what he means by “faith alone.” A faith that is by itself, a faith that is alone, he has argued, is a bogus faith, a sham faith, a sham precisely because a true and living faith is not alone, it produces a changed life and godliness and obedience. Sham faith does not produce and is not expressed by works of love and obedience. “Faith alone,” in v. 24 manifestly *does not mean* true and living faith in Jesus that happens not to produce obedience. The phrase “faith alone” in James describes a faith that is mere pretense, an imitation of the real thing. Remember Paul himself will write in Gal. 5:5 that what matters is “faith working through love.”

In summary there are two different ways to harmonize the statements of James and Paul. I’ll let you choose between them. One, as I mentioned earlier, is to take James to mean by “justified by works” in vv. 21 and 24 that faith is *proved genuine* by works, it is validated or authenticated by what it produces in our lives. Since true faith always produces an obedient life, one can know he has faith by arguing back from his way of life to its source or origin in his or her faith in Christ. The other way to harmonize James and Paul is to accept that both of them are using the term “to justify” in the same sense of “being declared righteous before God” but Paul is referring to the initial declaration of a sinner’s forgiveness before God, his right standing before God as a Christian in this world, while James is referring to the ultimate verdict of innocence pronounced at the Last Judgment that we know from many other texts is a verdict that is based on the works true faith in Christ will produce in a person’s life. [Moo, 141-142] I prefer the first myself, but whether that is James’ meaning here, the second is likewise and obviously a teaching of Jesus and his apostles. In either case, both writers see works of obedience and service as the proof, the evidence, and the validation of true and living faith in Jesus.

- v.26 James then concludes his argument with a final illustration and a concluding summary statement reiterating his main point throughout. As with Abraham, the great hero of Jewish history, so with Rahab, a Gentile prostitute – that is, whether we take our examples from the top or the bottom – faith is always proved by its deeds. The others in Jericho knew that God was with Israel, that he had performed miracles on her behalf. They too were trembling in fear, but it didn’t produce in them any action consistent with that faith. In Rahab’s case it led her to take risks on behalf of God’s people, to help them in need, and to bank her hope of survival and that of her family on her acknowledgement of the one true God.

And the final summary returns to the original point. We are talking about true and living faith and what is that? It is a disposition of confidence in God that invariably produces

good works! As the body without the spirit or soul is dead so faith without works is the equivalent of a corpse. [Tasker, 71] Or, as the early Reformed theologian, Caspar Olevianus put it:

“It is rather difficult to convince someone that a stone is alive when it remains absolutely motionless or that a drunk is sober when he is staggering from wall to wall.” [“Quemadmodum si quis mihi persuadere velit statuum vivere, que tamen neque ambulare neque quicquam movere possit. Aut, quemadmodum si ebrius, qui ab uno pariete cadat in alterum, mihi persuadere velit, se esse sobrium.” *Com. Gal. 5:25*, p. 127]

Thus far the Word of God. James’ point is clear and emphatic. Real faith, genuine faith, is invariably in its very nature and character a working faith. It produces good works of obedience and service to God and others; it expresses itself in those works, and it is vindicated or validated by them. Any faith, therefore, that fails to give birth to a real Christian life is a sham and will not bring a sinner peace with God. Paul says the same thing, as did Jesus before him and the prophets before them all. And generally, this has been not only the Reformed, but the Christian understanding of true and living faith. Now before we attend to James’ emphatic declaration that faith must and will work, *let’s be sure we appreciate that James is as ardent an advocate of justification by faith as any other New Testament writer.*

He begins in 1:3 talking about the testing *of our faith*. He reminds us that we must ask *in faith* if we hope to receive what we ask for from God. He says that both in 1:6 and in 5:15. In 2:1 he speaks of *holding faith* in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in v. 5 of those who are poor by the standards of this world being *rich in faith* and heirs of the kingdom. Faith throughout James “is the primary thing, the hallmark of the Christian, the irreplaceable priority.” [Motyer, 106] Indeed, even throughout the section we have just read, the whole question is, in a way, a question *about faith*. What is it? If it is so important, so decisive, if it is the thing that matters most, we need to know how to distinguish it from its counterfeits.

Further, there is no doubt that the way James introduces the issue in v. 14 – “Can that faith save him?” – is intentionally provocative. He is arresting his readers’ attention and, as subsequent history has proved, he succeeded! Already at this early stage of Christian reflection on the gospel, it was clear to everyone that salvation was suspended on *faith in Jesus Christ*. We have already noted in our sermons in Acts that at the very beginning, from Pentecost onwards, the distinctive summons of Christian preaching was *to believe* in Jesus Christ. Indeed, the earliest Christian community is defined in Acts 2:44 simply as “all who believed.” And the advance of the Gospel is similarly described in terms of faith: “...many of those who had heard the word believed...” (Acts 4:4) or “the full number of those who believed...” (4:32).

There can be no question at any point in the New Testament that faith – that believing in or trusting one’s life and future to Jesus – was from the very beginning understood as the means by which one laid claim to salvation and eternal life. It is the *sine qua non* of the human side of salvation, the essential condition. This was the teaching of Jesus and of all his apostles. *And that is why James’ question is provocative.* It would only be so in a context in which it was universally understood that the forgiveness of sins and eternal life were received *by faith*.

Nor is there anything unlikely about the argument James has given us here. The Judaizing element that Paul had to deal with in Galatians and elsewhere was a natural, we might say inevitable by-product of Christianity's having sprung up in the soil of first century Judaism. It was very hard even for new Christians to shed the legalistic mindset of their upbringing and religious training, all the more as Christian teaching likewise stressed obedience to the law of God. That presented a two-fold temptation. If church history teaches us anything it is that if certain features of a religious culture will inevitably pose temptations, there will be a great many people who fall prey to *those* temptations. On the one hand, some Jewish Christians were so imbued with the spirit of law-keeping that they struggled, and we know in some cases unsuccessfully (think of the Judaizers in Galatia), to rid themselves of the instinctive disposition to think that their relationship with God, faith notwithstanding, still fundamentally depended upon their obedience to his law. They may well have agreed that faith was important, they might even have said that faith was decisive, but still they related their justification, their acceptance with God to their own obedience, not to Christ's obedience on their behalf.

But, if that were so in some cases, how inevitable must it have been that some would over-react to that legalism, celebrate faith in its distinction from works of obedience, and find it difficult to distinguish between legalism and obedience itself, between a theory of works-righteousness on the one hand and the necessity of actual righteousness on the other. Paul, for example, faced this very problem among some of his converts and anticipated the inevitable over-reaction in Romans 6. "What shall we say then? Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound?" That is, if my acceptance with God has nothing to do with how *I* keep the law but only on Christ's having kept it for me, then why should I even bother to struggle to obey the searching commands of God's law? To be frank, the fact that Christ fulfilled the law for those who trust in him has *always* threatened to undermine the conviction that Christians must still keep the commandments of God. The logic is not hard to follow. It is so obvious, the temptation is inevitable. If my standing with God has nothing to do with how well I keep God's commandments, because it rests instead on Christ's perfect law-keeping in my place and his bearing on my behalf the penalty of my disobedience, then what difference does it make if, once I have trusted myself to Christ for salvation, I don't obey the law of God?

There are a number of answers to that question furnished in the Bible, to be sure, but the answer that James gives is that *it is the very nature of true faith to want to obey God's commandments*, to want to serve him, to want to honor God's grace in one's life by doing what pleases God, and to want to embody one's loyalty to Jesus in acts of obedience and service. A man or woman who truly *believes* that God has been astonishingly merciful, kind, and generous to him or her, *in the nature of the case*, desires to show mercy to others. True faith in Jesus makes mercy a beautiful thing to the believer. To refuse to show mercy would be equivalent to admitting that God's mercy has left you unmoved, unimpressed, and unchanged. But when God's mercy is seen – as it will be seen by anyone who realizes that only because of that utterly undeserved kindness on God's part is he or she to live joyfully forever – I say, when God's mercy is seen for what it is, one will love mercy and a person who loves mercy will, *in the nature of the case*, show mercy to others. By real faith in Christ, in other words, mercy or love or holiness becomes *a power* in a person's heart and life.

When Jesus said that if we love him we will keep his commandments, he was trading in that same logic. If you love someone – and faith in the New Testament is very often simply another term for love and vice versa – you will want to please him and if you know that nothing pleases him so much as a righteous life, you will aspire to live such a life yourself. *This is why faith always produces works.* It has the aspiration to godliness in itself as an inevitable implication of a real trust, a genuine dependence, and a loving acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior.

In Protestant theology, faith is usually defined as having three components. The *first* is *notitia* or knowledge. True faith operates with a knowledge of the gospel, the facts of redemption, and the promises of God. Without that knowledge faith would empty, a trust in nothing. The *second* is *assensus*, or agreement. True faith obviously agrees that the gospel is true, that the acts of redemption actually happened, and that God having made such promises will surely keep them. The *third* is *fiducia* or trust, the act of the will by which a person embraces Christ and those promises for himself or herself, commits himself or herself to them for his or her peace with God and hope of heaven. It is by *fiducia* that anyone says and means “The Lord is *my* shepherd.” Notitia and assensus could say Christ is the Lord; Fiducia says that Christ is *my* Lord.

Faith is described in all three of these ways repeatedly in the Bible. But what James is telling us here is that true faith, living and saving faith, must have all three of these components. Faith without knowledge is useless, though in recent days in our American politics we have come to speak of “people of faith” or “faith-based ministries,” as if faith is in and of itself meaningful without regard to its object. In fact, faith without knowledge is nothing and nobody has yet defined what “faith” actually would be in and of itself, as if you could have trust or confidence in nothing at all. Once you add knowledge to the definition of faith, it is perfectly obvious that everyone is a believer, the atheist as surely as the evangelical Christian or the jihadist Muslim. In the same way, faith without assent is likewise nothing. No one has faith worthy of the name in what he doesn’t actually believe. Though there is definitely a lot of that sham faith around; always has been. Perhaps the highest form of knowledge without assent would be wishful thinking. You find such a faith in the evangelical Christian who says he is sure that Christ is coming again next year but still pays the premium on his life insurance!

But, while most people would accept that we have emptied faith on any meaning if it does not have knowledge and agreement, there have been many who have thought you could have an authentic form of faith that lacks that personal commitment, *fiducia*, which binds a man or woman to Christ in a living relationship of dependence, confidence, and love. No, says James, *that isn’t faith either. The demons have that kind of faith!*

Look at the contrast James draws between the “armchair philanthropist” of v. 16 and Rahab the “risk taker” in v. 25. Rahab was risking everything because she believed in the one living and true God. She would have been executed by her fellow citizens in Jericho for having hidden the spies if they had discovered that she had done so. The man who simply says pious things to the hungry and naked has risked nothing. What is the difference? The difference, James is saying, is that the one *actually believes in Christ*, the other does not. As James concludes, it is as essential to their nature that faith and works belong together as it is that a human being should have both a body and a soul.

Let's not overthink this. We all know from our own experience that the stronger our faith is, the more obedient and useful our lives become. We know very well that there is a direct connection between our faith and the strength of our faith and the way we live our lives. And, of course, when we witness a conversion, a person coming to faith in Jesus, we expect to see and then we do see their lives changing. It is a fixed law.

I often think of Amy Tracy. Some of you may know her story. She was a practicing lesbian, an activist for and later press secretary of NOW, the *National Organization for Women*. She was actively involved in the effort to defeat Clarence Thomas' election to the Supreme Court. She picketed and marched for abortion rights, organized rallies and protests, and, as a result, came to despise evangelical Christians, the principal enemy of that cause, and, alas, who often behaved in ways that were a terrible recommendation of the gospel. But Amy was a deeply unhappy person and eventually her longings for acceptance, purity, and meaning in life compelled her to seek God and, to make a long story short, here in Seattle the Lord drew her to himself and she committed her life to Christ, hardly knowing what in the world she was doing.

The girlfriend with whom she had been living mocked her new faith, accused her of consorting with the kind of people that want to put gay men and women in a concentration camp, and she found herself alienated from the very people whom she had long counted on for support. For six months after her conversion she did her best not to think about the social issues that had up to that point been her life. But one day, reading a newspaper and several stories on these controversial issues of our day, she realized that her views, her outlook on life, her convictions had changed. She hardly knew why. No one had talked to her about this, she hadn't read a book, but she realized that partial birth abortion grieved God. She knew she could no longer live as a lesbian. Shortly thereafter she went to work for Focus on the Family, an organization that stood for everything she had once despised. And in the years since her life has changed in radical ways. She is a gospel witness, devotes herself to caring for the needy and the dying, and is a senior writer for the Global Mission department of David C Cook, the evangelical publishing house.

Amy Tracy's life didn't change because she had believed in Jesus for her salvation from sin and death and then, several years later, happened to read James 2 and realized that she ought to be adding some good works to her faith. Her life changed, her behavior changed, her interests changed, her causes changed naturally, relentlessly, simply because she was now a believer in Jesus. Once anyone realizes that Jesus is Lord of all things and the savior of sinners, all manner of things must change and will change. Once one has encountered the love of God one cannot live the same life one had lived before. Once one experiences deliverance from sin and death, one enters a different world where a new set of loves directs one's steps. Amy didn't perform what Christians call good works in the first place because she realized she was supposed to. Those good works were the effulgence, the overflow of her personal commitment to Christ and to the truth he had revealed to her about herself, about the world, about salvation, about the goodness of his will, and about the future. They were the result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which always accompanies faith in Jesus. They were the inevitable result of the new birth, without which no one can believe in Jesus. Such changes are sanctification which always accompanies justification. Justification and sanctification can be distinguished, they are different

things to be sure – the forgiveness of sins from the transformation of life – but they can never be separated; they are aspects of the same divine salvation that God grants to his chosen ones.

That is why faith without works is dead. It can't really be faith at all if it doesn't produce a distinctly Christian life.