5-26-24

James 2:14-26

This section of James has historically proven to be very difficult to understand. James seems to be advocating a salvation by works. In fact he says in verse 24, “*You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” This appears to contradict Paul who says in Romans 3:28, “*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*” Also, there are the words of Jesus Himself in John 3:16 where He tells us that believing in Him (which is faith) is the way to eternal life.

James also refers to Abraham and Rahab being “justified” by works. The Bible is very clear that we are justified when God declares us “Not Guilty” by reason of our accepting Jesus as our Saviour in faith. These things, while seemingly contradicted by James, are supported by him. We just need to evaluate what he is saying in the context of his letter. I pray the Holy Spirit works in each of us to give us understanding and the ability to grasp the message He has for us through James.

James begins verse 14 by asking two questions and both of them have a negative answer. The first one basically tells us that having a so-called faith that has no works is useless. He gives an example that sounds absurd but unfortunately is probably rather common. He presents someone who has a basic human need; one that is needed for survival.

The church member who encounters this person piously says to them “*be warm and be filled*”. That does not help. Imagine meeting someone who truly needs food and you say to them, “I’ll pray for you” and walk away. As James later says in 4:17, “*Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*” And there are countless times where we could help someone who needs help. Perhaps they even just need someone to talk to. We may not want to give up our time to listen so we turn away. That is not a faith that acts.

The basic problem with not caring for another’s physical needs is that it violates the royal law: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. If you are hungry, you’re going to get yourself something to eat. Loving your neighbor involves doing things. In other words, works. God can and will intervene supernaturally. But for the most part, He works through His creation. That is just how He has chosen to accomplish things. We can see in the Bible that He has worked using His angels to be messengers and to provide protection. In the same way, God uses you and I to help others who have needs.

Praying for someone is good and necessary. And sometimes, that is all we can do. But if we can help someone and don’t do it, promising to pray for them; it is a cop out. God put us there in the path of that person as an answer to their prayer; or at least an answer to their need. We can then use that opportunity to share the Gospel if they are an unbeliever. Once physical needs are met, a person’s focus can be directed elsewhere: to the needs of their soul.

The second question in this verse is “*Can that faith save him?*” Can a faith that has no works save the person from the wrath of God? The expected answer is “no.” There are many people who have a cursory belief in Jesus which will not save them. All the people who practice Islam believe that Jesus was real and that He was a great prophet. That is not a saving faith. There are many who go to church all their lives but who live the rest of the week just like the rest of the world. That is not a saving faith. James gives us a verse that ought to shock us into awareness: *You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.*

The fallen angels, even satan, believe that God is one; that Jesus is the Saviour and that He is God. But they will not act on that knowledge. As an aside point, salvation was not offered to them. It has only been offered to us; members of the human race. That ought to tell us how blessed we are that God has given us a chance. The fallen angels prove that God, in His justice, does not have to offer a second chance. But in His kindness He has offered it to us. He is worthy of our constant praise.

But more to the point, the angels knew this before they rebelled and that did not stop them. They know their fate; the Bible makes it clear. And because they know that He is all-powerful God, they shudder. While we are not called to shudder, we are called to have a reverent fear of God. He is not to be toyed with and He knows our heart. If we have not truly turned to Jesus for salvation, He knows it. And if our faith does not result in works, it is not a saving faith.

We know from Jeremiah (31:33) that God writes His law on the heart of His people. We know from Ezekiel (11:19, 18:31) that He has given a new heart to His people. If we don’t change the way we do things, it is a strong indication that we don’t have a new heart. That change involves works of kindness and mercy for other people; self-sacrificial acts.

Verse 18 is a little difficult in the Greek so different Bible translations write it differently. But no matter how it is written we get the point. Simply claiming faith is no good. Our works become the evidence of our faith. That is why they are inseparable. Works do not save us, faith does. But true faith will show itself in works.

And so James says in verse 17, “*Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself*.” I think we all know that anything that is dead doesn’t do anything. Dead faith can’t do anything; it can’t save you.

In verse 20 James goes after the one who rests satisfied on their claim to have faith but who are not willing to get their hands dirty in acting out their faith. It is really strong language to call someone foolish. Jesus warned us all to be very careful using that term. And we know from Proverbs that it is the fool who says in his heart that there is no God. That points to the problem: Someone who doesn’t act on their belief in Jesus doesn’t really believe that He exists. If we have any understanding of His power and what He has done for us; and if we have been given the Holy Spirit who seals those who believe; then we will live our lives in accordance with His will.

Now James refers to two examples from the Old Testament. The first is the well-known story of Abraham in Genesis 22. James says that Abraham was justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac. Then he quotes Genesis 15:6, “*And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*” This is the same quote that Paul uses to establish that Abraham was justified by faith.

When we think of the word “justified” in a Christian context, we think of God declaring us “Not guilty”; that we are made righteous. It has that specific doctrinal meaning. But the actual word simply indicates that something is righteous. So Abraham was declared righteous by God for his faith, and solely on his faith. But later, when he offered Isaac on the alter in obedience to God it was a righteous act.

And this ties in with Hebrews 11:6, “*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*.” So it would have been impossible for Abraham to act righteously in God’s sight if he did not already have faith in God. This shows us that no matter how good an act of an unbeliever is, it is not acceptable to God. It was not done in belief.

How can James say that Abraham was justified by his work; by his obedience to God? His act of obedience in placing Isaac on the alter was done after God had already declared him righteous by faith; God had justified him. People who are righteous do righteous things. If we do something that is righteous; that is acceptable to God; it shows that we have faith. Our works justify us because we have already been justified by God. True saving faith brings about works; righteous works. Again, just, righteous works are the evidence of belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour.

James gives another example of Rahab the prostitute. Rahab is the absolute demonstration that salvation is by faith and not earned by good behaviour. Rahab’s story is told in Joshua chapter 2. She was a prostitute who lived in the city of Jericho. Joshua had sent spies to look over the city and report back. It became known in the city that they were there.

Rahab hid the spies and told the city soldiers that they had already left; then sent them on a wild goose chase. When the soldiers had gone, Rahab told the Israelite spies to hide in the wild until the soldiers came back. She believed in the Lord God of Israel and that He was going to give His people that land. She demonstrated her faith by caring for the Israelite spies and then asking them for mercy.

Of course, when Israel took over the city of Jericho, Rahab and all her family were spared. She had faith and acted on it at the risk of her own life. She was justified because of her faith and her righteous act was acceptable to God. She even became an ancestress of Jesus.

James uses two examples to make his point. One was held in high regard as the father of all Israel. The other would have been a despised gentile. James shows that an active faith saves. Consider all the other people in the city of Jericho who believed in the God of Israel, but didn’t act on that faith. None of them made it out alive.

James returns to the idea of dead faith. This is a vivid concept. This is faith, some kind of simple belief, that has nothing solid attached to it. It is an acknowledgement of Jesus while denying the power of the Christ. As we mentioned earlier, dead things don’t do anything. A dead person doesn’t move around, a dead animal just lies there, and dead faith is the same. It cannot save you.

Having faith in Jesus needs to cause changes. This is sanctification. Some will change faster and more than others; but change is necessary. The change doesn’t save you; it is the evidence that you are saved. James is giving a call to look at our lives. Are there evidences of salvation? Remember that we are called to sacrificial action. Romans 12:1 says, “*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*”

None of us will ever be called by God to crawl up on an altar to be sacrificed. None of us will be called to sacrifice any of our children on an altar. At this point, there is only an outside chance that we will be called to give our lives rather than denying our Lord. But we are called to live for Christ, and in living for Him we are dying to self. We sacrifice our time and resources for the benefit of others and for the sake of His Kingdom.

Decades ago, there was a popular teaching that you could live as a carnal Christian. That you could live in all the ways of the world while claiming Jesus as Saviour. Maybe; but I sure wouldn’t recommend trying it. Everything I read here in James cries out against that. We have to be justified by faith before we can accomplish righteous acts; the only acts acceptable to God. And there is no carnal act that is righteous.

The Bible makes it clear that salvation comes only by believing in Jesus. But as we read and study, we come to find out what belief entails. When we come to Christ for salvation, there is a spiritual attachment that takes place. Jesus spoke of Himself being the vine and that we are the branches. We are attached to Him and we receive all we need from Him. Once we are attached to Him, if we were severed from Him, we would die.

When Jesus becomes our Saviour, something mysterious takes place. Mysterious in that we can’t truly understand what has taken place; our minds can’t comprehend it. But we know it happens because we change. It becomes our desire to be pleasing to Christ. We want to serve God. We are most fulfilled in our lives when we are doing for others. It is something that the rest of the world doesn’t have, but deep down inside, it’s what they want.

It is in loving our neighbor that we can open doors to share the Gospel with them. That is a righteous act; one that shows we are justified; one that is according to the will of God.

Prayer

Blessed Lord, please don’t let us be blinded, don’t let us be deceived. Open our spiritual eyes so that we can see if we have deeds that demonstrate our faith in Jesus; our commitment to You, the Almighty. Please don’t let us come to church week after week, read Your word, attend Bible studies, without performing acts of charity that are pleasing to You.

Thank You for this letter of James that tells us so clearly that we must be doing something. Thank You for this concrete way of testing our salvation; of testing our faith. Increase our faith; breathe into it new life; give us the deep desire to be hard at work for the Kingdom of Christ.

Merciful Lord Jesus, it is a terrifying thought that some will hear from You, ‘*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.*’ By Your Holy Spirit, may we practice lawfulness, being covered in Your righteousness. Being righteous in You, may our righteousness be seen, that others will come into the light of Christ.

It is in the name of Jesus we pray

Amen