

James 2:14-26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] James chapter 2 verses 14 to 26. What good is it my brothers if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and one of you says to them go in peace be warmed and filled without giving them the things needed for the body what good is that? So also faith by itself if it does not have works is dead. But someone will say you have faith and I have works show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one you do well even the demons believe and shudder. Do you want to be shown you foolish person that faith apart from works is useless?

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by his works and the scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone and in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way. For as the body apart from the spirit is dead so also faith apart from works is dead. James's concern for pure religion continues into the second half of chapter 2.

He is concerned here with the reduction of faith to bare profession. Faith without works he argues is like a corpse. It's not a matter of adding works to faith but rather of works being inseparable from true faith. Perhaps we might also see James continuing some of his concerns about partiality here. The importance of ministering to needy people within the church sets up the discussion of faith and works. James's treatment of faith and works here is structured as a sort of diatribe against an opponent. James is setting up the voice of someone who holds a position opposed to his own and dialoguing with that throughout. His concern earlier had clearly been for works of mercy, for concern for the poor and those who are needy, on visiting widows and orphans, keeping oneself unspotted from the world and receiving the poor with a proper welcome in their assemblies. Such concerns might be seen here as well. He begins with an example that shows that a bare expression of goodwill is utterly insufficient for performing the works of mercy. If a person is poor, unclothed and hungry, they need something a lot more than simple expressions of goodwill and good luck. They need positive assistance, but mere words aren't going to give them that. While the moving of one's heart in concern towards the poor is clearly very important, as is a verbal commitment to their well-being, by themselves those things are not enough. Rather they must be expressed in a concrete practical commitment to the well-being of the people in need. Anything short of that is completely futile.

And this provides a good analogy for the situation of a faith without works. Such a faith may be properly disposed in some ways. Such a faith may express itself well in orthodox doctrinal commitments.

But if it lacks works, it's completely ineffectual and dead. In verse 18, his imagined interlocutor presents two different cases. Here's one person who says he has faith, and here's another person who says he has works. To which James responds, if you indeed have faith, show me that faith apart from any works, and my faith will be demonstrated by my works. Works are absolutely inseparable from faith.

[3 : 44] The idea that you could have faith without works is nonsensical. There are those who will insist that they have faith because they can make the basic creedal commitments, such as the Shema, the statement that the Lord our God is one. But making such a statement is no guarantee of right standing with God. The demons themselves, God's sworn adversaries, can make that statement. And in their case, that statement, far from being assurance of their right standing with God, is a cause of their terror before him.

James drives his point home by two great examples from the Old Testament, Abraham and Rahab. Abraham is the paradigmatic Jew, he's the one who's the father of the people of Israel, and Rahab is the paradigmatic Gentile, a once ungodly Canaanite prostitute who was brought into the people of God. James points to the events of Genesis chapter 22 as proof of Abraham's faith and the perfection of his faith. Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac. This was the last great test that Abraham faced. He had been called earlier on to leave his home, to leave behind his past, and in Genesis chapter 22 he was called to sacrifice his future, everything that Isaac represented. As he responded faithfully to this test, he was blessed by the Lord and the promise was confirmed to him. James effectively argues you can't read Genesis chapter 15 verse 6, where we are told that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness, without paying attention to this later part of the story, where he is blessed on account of his faithfulness. Abraham being called a friend of God, someone in good standing with God, is something that arises not merely from his faith, but also from such works. And the offering up of

Isaac is a completion of Abraham's faith in works. This is what it looks like when faith comes to its maturity. He appeals to Rahab as well. Rahab was someone who received the word concerning the people of Israel and the way that the Lord was going to give them the land and believed it, and as a result she received the messengers and sent them out by another way. While she believed the word of the report, she would not have enjoyed the standing that she enjoyed in the people of God had she not transformed that into the practical action of acting as she did towards the spies. All of this goes to show, for James, that as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is like a lifeless corpse. A true and active faith is always seen in its works. Apart from works it is lifeless and useless. Perhaps one of the most challenging things about this passage is how to relate it to the teaching that Paul has in his epistles. James' interlocutor has an unsettling similarity to a bastardised Paul. There is a very sharp seeming contrast with Paul in some of the statements that he makes in passages such as Romans chapter 3 verse 28. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Now compare that to verse 26 of this chapter. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Paul also uses the example of Abraham in chapter 4 of Romans and particularly references Genesis chapter 15 verse 6 about Abraham believing God and it being accounted to him for righteousness. And so we are left to speculate about the relationship between

James and Paul's teaching. Is James directly attacking Paul or is he attacking some straw man of Paul? Both in Acts and in the book of Galatians we see tensions between people from James and people associated with Paul and his message. Considering that by the admission of the apostle Peter and others Paul's teaching was difficult to understand and the fact that there were many teachers going around associated with people like James or Paul who seemed to have a slightly garbled notion of what they were teaching. It might be most likely that James is responding to someone who has taken on some elements of Paul's teaching and has developed it in quite an erroneous direction.

While Galatians chapter 2 and Acts chapter 15 might suggest that James and Paul resolved any initial distrust that might have been between them it is likely that both face problems with members of the other person's camp. To understand how to relate the two it's important to stand back and to consider how they are using their terms and the more specific concerns that they have. When Paul talks about works for instance he is generally talking about works of the law. Works that are associated with the Torah that separate Israel from the Gentiles marking them out as the people of God. For instance in Romans chapter 3 verse 28 the statement is that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. The words of the law there really matter as a qualification of what he means by works. A further thing to consider is the way that Paul is particularly concerned about how one gets standing in the people of God. Most particularly how Gentiles enter in the first place. In this context where he focuses upon faith and rules out works. He is especially focusing upon the fact that Gentiles get into the people of God apart from circumcision, the dietary requirements and other things that would mark out the Jews as Jews. Rather they are accepted as Gentiles through faith on the basis of the achievement of Christ. James however is concerned less with the question of first entry into the people of God and more with the way in which faith works itself out.

[9 : 13] Faith is perfected or completed by works. Faith, a wholehearted trust in God that does not express itself in transformed practice, is not really a faith at all. One of the things that Paul is most concerned that we see is that the efficacy of faith for salvation is not situated in its own power to work so much as in its response to God's promise. It's grasping onto something outside of itself. However James' concern is to show that faith in its proper nature will be expressed in works. There's no such thing as a workless faith.

As we look further in the teaching of Paul it should be clear that he holds much the same thing as James. In passages such as Romans chapter 2 he speaks about a final judgment according to works and he means it.

On the last day we will be blessed or we will be condemned on the basis of our works. The tension that people see between Paul and James is really a tension that can be seen in Paul's own teaching.

A tension between our standing in the people of God being on the basis of faith and the fact that we will be judged according to works. Of course this tension is just an apparent one. The solution is found in the teaching of James here. The solution is that faith is active along with our works and faith is completed by our works. This is not a teaching that works are a different sort of thing that need to be added to faith to make effective. Rather the point is that faith by its very nature will produce works and that as faith grows to maturity works will be an expression of that maturity. On the last day when we are judged according to works our works will be a manifestation and evidence of our faith. Those works in and of themselves are not things that set us right with God. Rather what makes those works effective is the fact that faith is active in them. Those works are the fruit of an active faith. Recognising all of this then we need to see no irresolvable contradiction between Paul and James. Rather they are making different sorts of points in contrasting yet compatible ways. A question to consider. Reading the work of Paul it seems that he is primarily focused on the question of entry and justification by faith as the fundamental declaration that we are members of the people of God. A declaration made not on the basis of works whether works of the flesh or even works of an active faith. When we first come to God we have nothing to show for ourselves.

However James's attention seems to be later on in time. Not the initial entry but what happens to true faith as we grow and mature and how God's justification or vindication of us can be according to the practical faithfulness that is the unavoidable outworking of true faith. How can reading James and Paul together give us a fuller understanding of what faith and justification mean?