

Christ Reformation Church

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A Faith that Works ***The Epistle of James***

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (2:24)

“The Sinner is justified by Faith, but Faith is justified by Works”

August 16, 2015

Sermon Text: James 2

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction-

Once more let me remind you that very, very often this Epistle of James has been characterized as being similar to Proverbs. That is to say, people don't seem to be able to identify a central, unifying theme which the various parts relate and contribute to.

But this is an error. There is a central theme and it is this:

James is a handbook on the discernment of good and evil. Specifically, the discernment of good and evil in the visible church. True versus false faith. True Christians in contrast to counterfeits.

And therefore this is a vitally important portion of Scripture.

The portion before us this morning is a direct continuation of what James has been writing about: that where there is no mercy, a false legalistic gospel reigns. So that a very certain means of identifying the counterfeit believer is to ask ourselves, “do we see mercy in this person's life as a characteristic?” The example give was that concerning a rich man and a poor man coming into the midst of people who claim to be Christians. If partiality for the rich man is shown and the poor man is spurned, then we can be sure that mercy does not exist there. And if that be so, neither is the true gospel there.

So James continues now in the very same vein as he speaks to us here about faith. Follow along as I read:

James 2:14-26 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, (16) 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?

(17) So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (18) 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.

(19) You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!

(20) Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; (23) 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. (24) You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

(25) 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? (26) For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Now, we are familiar with this Scripture and we have all learned about the truth that genuine faith always yields the fruit of good works. The person, as James says, who claims to know the Lord but whose faith is not evidenced in works, is not a Christian. After all, even the devil acknowledges the *facts* of the gospel. He believes and knows full well that Christ is the Son of God. He knows there is only one true God. But the devil is not a Christian!

Notice once more the continuity shown – James is speaking again of a scenario involving still another poor man.

(14) What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, (16) 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?

Now, let me ask this: *what quality is necessary for such a situation – seeing a fellow believer without adequate clothing or food?* It is *mercy*. Compassion. Empathy. Love. And so I believe that James is still addressing the legalist counterfeits in the church who are exposed by their lack of these qualities. They are all talk. They talk religion. They talk God. "Go in peace..." but there is no action. They are *merciless*, and that kind of "faith" is only going to lead to a Day of judgment *without mercy*.

The Apostle Paul rebuked the Corinthians for something very similar:

1 Corinthians 11:17-22 But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. (18) For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, (19) for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. (20) When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.

(21) For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. (22) What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

This is not speaking of giving handouts to sluggards. No. What James and Paul are talking about is the scenario *in a local church* where there are genuine believers in genuine need, and those who are wealthy and over-filled are not showing mercy toward them.

James, you see, is describing *true faith* and he is showing us that this faith which the Lord gives each one of His own people is no mere mental assent to a set of doctrines. Nor is this faith simply *words*. Even if those words are "God-talk," they are still just words. No, this faith by which we are united to Christ is *dynamic*. *It is operative*. *It is a working energy that cannot NOT work*. I suppose we might compare faith to *light*. Light simply cannot NOT shine. By virtue of what it is in the essence of its being, *light must shine*. And if it doesn't, it is not light!

So it is with faith. Faith *works*. Faith shows mercy. Faith *does the works of the Lord*. Not to earn merit with God,

but because it is what it is. And so we see the absolute absurdity of any teaching which says that a person can be a Christian and yet never obey the Lord.

James continues –

(17) So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (18) 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.

Faith is *alive*. It really is almost synonymous with the Spirit in the believer. The Holy Spirit is *living and powerful*, and so if a person is merciless, if they evidence no fruit of the Spirit, then their "faith" is not the faith Christ gives us. It is a "dead faith" that is no faith at all. So certain are these principles that James can say he can show the reality of his faith by his works. And the central works he is speaking of are those connected with *mercy*.

(19) You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!

Is the Devil merciful? Will you ever find examples anywhere in the Bible that even hint that Satan possesses an ounce of mercy? No. Yet the Devil, as

we already noted, and all the hordes of demons, believe and know that God is the one true God. So well and so certainly do they know this and BELIEVE it, that they *shudder in fear as a result*:

Matthew 8:28-32 And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. (29) And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" (30) Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. (31) And the demons begged him, saying, "If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs." (32) And he said to them, "Go." So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters.

Now, we all desperately need to get hold of this truth firmly and see it with a clarity we have not seen it before. Here it is:

A person, a member of a church, a member of this church, can CRY OUT, "Oh Son of God!" to Jesus Christ and acknowledge that He is the

Judge of the living and the dead, of creatures above and of creatures below, including the demons. They can beg Him to answer their requests. And with all of that, still be nothing more than a demon, a child of the devil.

And how do we discern the difference? I say again, faith working itself out in *mercy*. Genuine, authentic mercy toward brothers and sisters in Christ as opposed to dealing out judgment and condemnation to them.

A man can stand in the middle of a worship service and offer up the most pious sounding prayer, and be nothing more than a demon. A woman can be the head of the women's ministry, chairperson of the missions society... and still be nothing more than a child of hell. And churches today almost universally have such people.

Did you notice in the Scripture reading text from Matthew 25 what the nature of the "works" were that believers did and which were spurned by the phonies?

Matthew 25:41-44 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (42) For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no

drink, (43) I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' (44) Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'

Mercy. Compassion. Love. They were merciless and they will be judged without mercy.

Underneath his façade of "godliness," the wicked counterfeit "Christian" will be devoid of mercy. He will habitually judge, condemn, and accuse Christ's people. His 'faith' is not justified by his works.

Two Examples:

James continues now with two biblical examples to prove what he is saying. Faith is *active*. Faith is *living*. Faith cannot NOT work!

(20) Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; (23) 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. (24) You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

(25) 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?

Let's go back and read the account in Genesis of Abraham's working faith:

Genesis 22:1-18 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." (2) He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (3) So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (4) On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

(5) Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again

to you." (6) And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. (7) And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (8) Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

(9) When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. (10) Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

(11) But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." (12) He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

(13) And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham

went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. (14) So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

(15) And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven (16) and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, **because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,** (17) I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, (18) and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

Could James be specifically referring us to the words in verse 16? *Because you have DONE this...I will surely bless you.*" And the blessing is specifically the Promise – it is the blessings of the gospel in Christ. We know that because of Romans 4.

In fact, what is interesting is that in Romans 4, Paul emphasizes Abraham's *belief*—

Romans 4:1-5 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? (2) For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (3) For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." (4) Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. (5) And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

And of course this seeming contradiction between Paul and James is what gave Martin Luther difficulties for a time.

Putting it All Together

Paul points to Abraham's faith in Genesis 15, his point being that Abraham was justified *before* he was circumcised (Gen 17). That is to say, we are justified in Christ *apart from the Law, apart from being a Jew by birth, and thus Christ is for all people, not just the Jews.*

James, on the other hand, points to Abraham's test in Genesis 22 in his discussion of justification. At that point, Abraham was already justified before God. His faith had been

credited to him as righteousness in Gen 15.

And so this 'justification' James is talking about is not the justification by which we are made righteous before God. That justification is by faith alone. James is speaking of something else. Namely, that faith is justified (shown to be genuine) by works.

Now let's be very precise and careful here lest we give any impression that we are spouting some kind of federal vision theology and saying that our works will justify us one future day in some sense of earning merit with God. No. We are simply stating what James is teaching: that our faith is demonstrated to be real by the works that always accompany it.

The sinner is justified (declared righteous) by faith alone

Faith is justified (shown to be authentic) by its works.

Same word, two different meanings. Here is a lexicon entry on it:

δικαιόω—1. *justify, vindicate, treat as just* Mt 11:19; Lk 10:29; 16:15 .
δ. τὸν θεόν *acknowledge God's justice* 7:29. *God is proved to be right* Ro 3:4; also Christ 1 Ti 3:16.—2. *pass., with reference to*

people *be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous*, in theological language *be justified* = receive the divine gift of δικαιοσύνη

Faith is *vindicated* by works, you see. Shown to be true and genuine. In this sense as you see, "God is justified" (proven to be right).

This vindication of faith then is what James is concerned with when he says that a person is justified by works, and not by faith alone. Listen to him again:

James 2:21-24 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; (23) 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. (24) You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Here, James mentions Abraham's justification by faith in Genesis 15. And he makes his argument plain – "and the Scripture was fulfilled." Isn't that interesting?

Faith was completed by his works

Faith is *active*. Faith “completes” itself by *working*. This is the very nature of genuine faith.

And this brings us right back around to this matter of *mercy*. James says that anyone who claims to be a Christian, but whose character is such that they show partiality to a rich man over a poor man, or who does this:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, (16) 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?

...is simply not a Christian. Faith is not vindicated in them.

Conclusion

We are theologically conservative, Bible-believing Christians. We maintain that sound doctrine is vital, as our confession of faith declares. We will not tolerate the unbelief of liberalism and we are very cautious, on guard against the threat of heresy, false teachers, and wolves who try to creep in among the flock.

But in our zeal for the Lord’s truth, we must also take care that we do not become ensnared in a trap that is too common in churches like ours. Namely, a lack of mercy. Yes, the liberal, unbelieving false “Christianity” is so often a “social gospel” – feeding the poor and acting against various social injustices, and doing so at the expense of the gospel, not as a furtherance of it.

BUT, we must not become unbalanced. James tells us that feeding and clothing the poor (particularly fellow believers), visiting widows and orphans in their need, *are examples of how genuine faith is justified*. The gospel we believe, if it is the true gospel, WILL impel us to be active in ways like this. *Acts of mercy will always be produced where Christ truly resides*. And where mercy is absent, Christ is absent.