

JAMES: Faith Without Works Is Dead

Understanding the Epistle of James

Lesson 1

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Before we begin our Bible study let us take a moment for the confession of sins. Filling of the Holy Spirit is required to understand the spiritual truth contained herein.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleans us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

If perchance you have not yet trusted Jesus Christ for your salvation - in order to receive edification from this study - the solution is to trust in His work on the cross as total payment for your sins.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:21).

Part I: Overview of the Spiritual Life

Prologue

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad [diaspora]: greetings (James 1:1).

My burden is not to prove without a shadow of doubt the authorship of this dynamic epistle, nor is it to establish the exact date of its penmanship and circulation. Rather, what lies heavily on me, is the burden, under God's undiminished grace and under the power of the Holy Spirit, to accurately interpret its content for *our* edification.

Most scholars credit the authorship of the epistle to James, the half brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. The date of its authorship is quite unknown; though, many attribute it to early dates. Zane C. Hodges, the Late Greek professor at Dallas Theological Seminary suggested dates of 34-35

A.D. citing that events in James's were confined within the time frame of Acts 1-9.¹ The audience undoubtedly were Jewish believers who, after Pentecost, failed to go beyond Jerusalem in response to our Lord's commission,

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

These believers remained comfortably in Jerusalem until the Lord, in His sovereign will and purpose, orchestrated persecution to force them to comply with His Great Commission,

Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him [i.e. Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they [the Jewish believers comprised of the twelve tribes] were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.... Therefore, those who had been scattered [by the force of persecution] went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:1, 4).

God keeps His Word! Often God uses suffering to bring about His desired result (2 Chronicles 15:3-6; cf. Psalm 119:67, 71).

Contextually, the Greek: *diaspora* - Jews living outside Palestine, actually refers only to Jewish believers scattered abroad at the time of James' epistle. This is because at the time of his epistle, the Gentiles were not yet included in the church. Not until the events of Acts, Chapter 10. Peter explained this in his dialogue with Cornelius in the following chapter (Acts 11). John A. Robinson agrees, “James is addressing all who form the true spiritual Israel, wherever they are. And he can address them in such completely Jewish terms not because he is singling them out from Gentile Christians but because, as far as his purview is concerned, there are no other Christians.”² The recipients were all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, for James addressed them as “BRETHREN” at least 15 times. Brethren is the unique New Testament epistolary word used in describing those who are in union with Christ (Hebrews 2:10-11; Colossians 1:2; Revelation 12:10). This brings us to the introduction of our text.

Introduction

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead (James 2:26).

² Ibid, p.11 Robinson, John A., Redating the New Testament. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976

With an inquisitive mind, we begin the introduction of this mouth-watering, mind boggling and soul stimulating epistle with an array of questions. *Dead faith*: What is it? Can it save anyone? If so, save them from what? The right question to ask is this: Was James talking about salvation from the lake of fire, or salvation from physical death? Of these two possibilities, James had only one in mind. This we must grasp; otherwise we will undoubtedly walk the slippery road to doctrinal error in our attempt to crack and interpret this hard nut of an epistle.

On one hand comes the BIG QUESTION, namely, which one of these two possibilities, *the lake of fire* or *physical death* does James have in mind? Therein is the *unsurpassed task*, determining what James had in mind when he uttered these sobering words,

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him (James 2:14).

Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself (2:17).

On the other hand, our hearts are saddened when we pause and reflect on the doctrinal positions taken by many as a result of misinterpretation of James' epistle, particularly James 2:14-26.

What is alarming is the failure of many scholars, including the best of the best, to decipher ***exactly*** what James had in mind when he said, "*What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?*" (James 2:14). In fact, their shortsightedness has caused them to develop erroneous doctrinal view points to the detriment of the church. What is striking is the magnitude of their failure to accurately interpret James! Think about *Lordship salvation*. The proponents of this viewpoint maintain that one cannot be truly saved unless one makes Christ, the Lord of one's life. Still another group, *salvation by works* holds its ground that works are essential to salvation. Now, we have another group which holds that though, salvation is by grace – faith alone in Christ alone – it must be evident by works. The list goes on and on. Tragically, they have built the foundation of their theological position on the sinking sand of misinterpretation of verses like the following:

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14).

You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder (James 2:19).

Faith without work is useless (James 2:20b).

Was not Abraham our Father justified by works, when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? (James 2:21).

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

Obviously these verses are the bones of contention in the entire book of James!

In other words, if the church has the power to delete James 2:14-26, then the entire epistle will sit on the same par with the rest of the New Testament epistles. That's to say, there would be no point of contention; and scholars would probably have nothing to wrestle with as far as the epistle is concerned. But the verses are inspired; they are part of Scripture! Thank God for that! The truth of the matter is that the entire text is super rich in every sense. Our task is not to delete, or wrestle them out of the text (even if we have the power) but rather to determine *exactly* what the Holy Spirit's intention was.

Interpreters of Scripture must strictly adhere to the rule of biblical interpretation, namely, "*Scripture interprets Scripture (or "obscure passages in Scripture must give way to clear passages"*).³ Harmony must prevail in our interpretation and reconciliation of biblical truths. If our interpretation of any given passage of Scripture leaves room for unanswered questions with regard to the rest of the Bible, it simply means we have not done our homework well! Repeat: *Scripture must harmonize with Scripture.*

When one examines the epistle of James under the principle of harmonious interpretation of Scripture; it becomes obvious that many communicators who have attempted to reconcile some obscure passages such as James 2:14-26 came away short in their effort. In my consultation of a handful of commentaries on James, it was apparent that many, with good intention to accurately interpret the text, nonetheless failed the test of harmonization of Scripture. Such an example of these commentators is Millard J. Erickson. Millard in his work, *Christian Theology* states that "...works do not produce salvation. Yet the biblical witness also indicates that while it is faith that leads to justification, justification must and will invariably produce works appropriate to the nature of the new creature that has come into being."⁴

This is the position held by many commentators, even the best of the best. But I ask, why? By taking this position, they imply that every genuine believer must produce good work. Such a dogmatic position clearly runs aground with other passages of Scripture such as,

And I, brethren [a reference to those who are united with Christ], could not speak to you as to spiritual men [those who bear fruit in Christ], but as to men of flesh [lack of spiritual production], as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not able, for you are still fleshly

³ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*: Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1970 3rd Edition p. 104

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*: Baker Books, 2nd Edition 1983, 1984, 1985, 1998, Grand Rapids pp. 972-973

[after about 18 months of their conversion and face-to-face teaching with the greatest Apostle, Paul {Acts 18:11}, yet there was no sign of fruit]. For instance there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly [carnal], and are you not walking [living] like mere men [unbelievers]? (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

Despite his rebuke, he added,

“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field [no matter your status quo], God’s building...you belong to Christ [no matter what]; and Christ belongs to God” (1 Corinthians 3:9, 23).

Of course, no good student of God’s Word would ever argue that the Corinthian believers were not genuinely saved; for Paul affirmed their salvation (1 Corinthians 1:2). The word ‘sanctified’ in First Corinthians 1:2 is in the *perfect tense* and also in the *passive voice*. On the one hand, the *perfect tense* brought to light the fact that their *sanctification* was once and for all (cf. Hebrews 10:10). On the other hand, the *passive voice* underscored the same fact that their salvation was solely God’s doing from the onset of their faith alone, in Christ alone to the end (1 Corinthians 1:30, 1:7-9). Even so, no one could read the first epistle of Corinthians without wondering whether they were truly saved. But they were! Grace!

Inversely, the wrong assertion that those who are truly saved must produce good work ignores the fact that living the spiritual life is not automatic; it’s not a natural thing. It requires self-discipline, personal responsibility and perseverance. To insist that regeneration must give evidence of itself in good works is to downplay the enormous pressure the sin nature exerts on the believer. This pressure begins at our new birth in Christ, as scripture reminds us.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. (Galatians 5:16-17 NIV).

At this juncture, an observant student of the Word may ask, “Why are there passages upon passages in the imperative mood; Scriptures commanding us to bear fruit, if bearing fruit is automatic based on regeneration?” Good question! Another way of putting it is this: “Why give a command to something that happens naturally?” For instance, “Why command a pregnant woman to see to it that she bears a child?” That sounds ludicrous. Does it not?

Of course! Scriptural mandates abound for us to do things that are totally unnatural to the human nature. “Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8). John the Baptist imperatively commanded those who had accepted his message to bear fruit. There’s no guarantee

that all will respond to his mandate. Similarly, the Apostle Paul took pain to write the believers at Ephesus:

For you were formerly darkness [unregenerate people], but now you are Light in the Lord; walk [present imperative = Keep on walking] as children of Light.... Do not participate [present imperative = stop participating] in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead expose them (Ephesians 5:8, 11; cf. Romans 13:12-14).

The Lord Himself explicitly mandated,

“Abide in Me [a command], and I in you. As the branch [born again believer] cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches [all believers]; he who abides in Me, and I in him bears much fruit; for apart from Me, you can do nothing” (John 15:4, 5).

Then comes the warning,

“If anyone [any believer] does not abide in Me [indicates possibility], he is thrown away as a branch [i.e. as an unfruitful believer], and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned [metaphor for intensive divine discipline and sin unto death]” (John 15:6)

Moreover, these proponents ignore or fail to take into account that believers who take their spiritual life carelessly will ultimately end up in the spiritual dungeon and if they persist they could ultimately suffer the *sin unto death*. That’s the issue James’ epistle addresses head-on (James 1:13-15; 1:21; 5:19, 20), which is the heart of his entire work. We shall develop this later on as our study progresses. But before we do, we need to consider the issue of fruit-bearing...which we will cover in our next lesson.

END LESSON 1

All verses NASB unless otherwise specified.

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