

Message #9

James 2:14-26

It is certainly very clear from passage after passage of Scripture that we are saved by grace alone, faith alone in Christ alone. That point is brought out in both the O.T. and the N.T.. Justification is by Imputation, not by any works and not connected to any works (Zechariah 3; Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 4:5; Romans 11:6; Galatians 2:16). Now the reason why we bring this up is because this is the one passage that people use to almost toss away their theological wits. People will throw out multiple passages of Scripture and take this one text in James and say this totally contradicts Paul. In fact, Luther thought that and actually rejected the entire book of James as an epistle of straw because of this text.

When we come to this part of James, there are only about four options:

- 1) James teaches a different way of salvation than Paul. Paul teaches non-works; James, works.
- 2) James teaches with no knowledge of Paul, and wrote before Paul developed grace theology.
- 3) James teaches the same thing as Paul, but brings out a different aspect. Paul teaches how grace justification begins and James teaches how grace justification develops.
- 4) James is discussing a Pharisaical justification versus a grace justification.

Now I don't believe James is teaching a different way of salvation because the Holy Spirit does not inspire contradictory data. So we disregard view #1. As to view #2 that James had no knowledge of Paul, we disregard that. In fact, in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem council, James stood up and defended Paul's justification by grace alone doctrine. We have already seen in this Epistle that James taught we were saved by God's will (1:18) and by faith in Jesus Christ (2:1). So we reject view #2. Views 3 & 4 really do fit the context of the book of James.

James lived in a very religious world that was focused on very religious works. It is like our world. You and I live in a world in which almost all people claim their religion is right. They have their intellectual orthodoxy and their denominational creeds and codes and they all say they are right. We live in a world in which all kinds of people from all different religions claim they are right with God and theirs is the right way. They are proud of themselves and proud of their works and frankly, their faith and their worship is useless and worthless. Many of these people are Pharisaical religious pretenders and frauds and James knew all about them.

This is where the context is missed. **James' discussion here is aimed at Pharisaical religious people who were saying they were right with God, who really weren't.** Their faith was a false, phony faith based on religion and not based on faith in Jesus Christ.

Notice the emphasis on what they were saying (**v. 14, 16**). These were Jewish Pharisees who were saying they were right with God and they were telling others that their religious system put them into a right relationship with God.

We specifically know this is the context because James said these people would end their services by saying, “go in peace” (v. 16) which was a Jewish shalom benediction. These Jews also believed and stressed that “God is one,” which was the Jewish Shema found in Deuteronomy 6:4.

Christ had died on the cross and the only way to having a relationship with God was through grace alone and faith alone in Christ alone. These Pharisees had not experienced God’s grace and they had not believed on Jesus Christ and what James is going to do is prove it.

These were very religious people who could talk a good game. They had their works and codes, but they had not experienced the grace of God. They claimed they were in a right relationship with God and their wealth and success proved it. James says I’ll prove you aren’t. James says let me prove otherwise because your dead religion does not match grace salvation and grace sanctification. In fact, what James says is this:

THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED GOD’S GRACE SALVATION AND GRACE JUSTIFICATION WILL DISPLAY IT NOT BY WHAT THEY SAY, BUT BY THEIR DEMONSTRATION OF GRACE FOCUS AND GRACE WORKS.

Keep the context in mind. James taught we were saved by faith in Christ (2:1). He taught we are to live our lives by the “law of liberty” (2:12), not by religious legalism and law. He taught we are saved by the grace of God as he said, “mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13).

Now James opens the discussion in **verse 14** by asking two questions to these mouthy, wealthy loving religious hypocrites:

Question #1 - What good is grace salvation if it does not ever produce grace transformation?

Now the “if” clause is 3rd class conditional, which is the clause of future probability. So I understand James to be saying in the future there will probably be many people who will come along and claim they have a relationship with God. That is what they will “say.” They will say they are right with God. They will have their religion and their rituals.

Question #2 - Have they really been saved by God’s grace if there are no grace demonstrations of grace works in their lives?

Do not miss this point. The noun “faith” that ends **verse 14** is articular. This is a specific kind of faith in religion that has not trusted in Jesus Christ. The question James is asking is not “what good is faith without works?” The question is “what good is it to say you have faith without works?” What good is it for you to tell people you are right with God if you never demonstrate grace works that show you are right with God?

So someone comes along and continually “says” (present tense) they are saved, but there is no hint of God’s grace ever doing anything in them. Is that person truly saved? Has that person really experienced saving faith?

That is what the religious world was doing. The Pharisees were continually telling people they were right with God but there was no hint that God’s grace had ever saved them. They were rigid and legalistic and they had their traditions and man-made codes and rules. What they did not have was anything that reflected God’s grace.

James’ point is if some religious legalist comes along saying they are right with God, but they have no evidence of a life touched by God’s grace, do they really have saving faith? There was no grace in their lives and there was no mercy in their lives and they were telling people they were saved by God’s grace. What James is about to prove is that they never believed on Jesus Christ because there is no evidence God’s grace has saved them, no matter how religious they appeared to be.

Now there are three arguments that James uses to prove that the religious Pharisees had never believed on Jesus Christ:

ARGUMENT #1 – You say you are right with God, but you have no merciful spirit toward a brother or sister who doesn’t have proper clothing or food. **2:15-16**

These people were real pieces of work. Some poor guy comes to church and they don’t even care if he gets a seat in the service. They are after the rich. Now James gives them another scenario.

In **verses 15-16**, James gives an illustration of the kind of grace merciful works he had in mind. He is not talking about all the religious legalistic works in which Pharisees were involved. They taught what you could and could not do on the Sabbath Day and frankly, they made life miserable for Jesus because He did not conform to their codes. These Pharisees never demonstrated anything that would suggest we have been saved by God’s grace.

Keep in mind that these Pharisees who were claiming they were right with God were actually responsible for forcing believers out of their houses and away from their jobs. So this illustration would really strike a nerve.

James says let’s suppose that a “brother” or “sister” (true believers) come into the religious setting and they don’t have sufficient clothing or food. In fact, they come to the worship service and haven’t had anything to eat that day. They are cold and hungry. Let’s suppose that one of you learns about their need and instead of trying to do something to help them, you say to them “Go in peace and be warmed and filled.” You do not care if they freeze to death or starve to death. Now do you think you are really indwelt by the Holy Spirit if you can see this and do nothing about this? What use is a faith that is like that? Where is the grace of God in that response?

This was exactly the kind of thing that Pharisees would do. In fact, it was normal for them to pronounce some Jewish benediction on the service that said, “go in peace.” **They had all their religious pomp and ceremony and they had all of their religious words, but what they did not have was grace in their hearts.**

James says in **verse 17**, this is not a demonstration of grace faith; this is some dead, legalistic religious faith that is useless and dead. In fact, the present tense of the verb “is” indicates there has never been saving grace faith. The person’s faith is continually a dead faith no matter how many religious works or ceremonies the person is involved.

A person can walk around saying they are right with God, but if they do not ever demonstrate the character and quality of grace works, they have a dead faith. Saving grace faith produces grace works. Now James anticipated that someone would argue the point, so he hits it straight on.

Anticipated Response #1 - The argument of what someone says. **2:18**

Now James anticipated that someone would come along and say, you say you are telling people that they are saved by faith alone in Christ by God’s grace, well I have my religious works. I have all kinds of religious rituals and works that I do so you can talk about faith all you want, but you show me your faith without my ritualistic works and I will show you my faith by all my ritualistic works. James’ point is your ritualistic works are not grace works.

Anticipated Response #2 - The argument of what someone believes. **2:19**

Furthermore, the person reasons that he believes in God just like James did. Well James says you believe in God. Clearly, when the person says they believe “God is one” they are referring to the Jewish belief found in what is called the O.T. Shema. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear O Israel: the LORD our God, the Lord is one.” So James is in an argument with a Pharisaical religious person who is saying he is right with God with all of his rituals.

You believe in God, that is good; but the demons also believe in God and they shudder. The demons have a tremendous fear of God, which is more than the Scribes and Pharisees. Notice the pronoun “you”-versus-“we.” James does not include himself with these Pharisees.

Demons have faith in God, but what they do not have is saving grace faith in Jesus Christ. A faith that is not focused on the grace of God that is found in Jesus Christ and a faith that is not interested in making adjustments and changes is no better than the faith of a demonic world.

So James says in **verse 20** you are foolish empty head. You need to recognize that true saving faith produces true grace works. There is no way that you could let a brother or sister starve if you had been touched by God’s grace.

James says you need to admit that your religious catechism and religious rituals and legalistic works that follow a bunch of codes and rules is not the same as God's grace. Grace faith produces grace works. Otherwise, not only is it a useless faith, it is not a saving faith, but a dead faith.

Now to prove his point, James uses two more arguments and two illustrations:

ARGUMENT #2 – You say you are right with God but you have no interest in obeying the Word of God in order to be friends with God. **2:21-24**

Now to get the full impact of what James is saying here, we need to go to **Genesis 15:6**. It is very clear from this text that the thing that gave Abraham his justification was his faith and not his works.

Now about 30 or 40 years later we come to Genesis 22:1-2. Let us remember that God promised Abraham that he would have an everlasting seed (Gen. 17:7-9). In Genesis 18:10-11 God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son. When we come to Genesis 21:12, it is stated that through Isaac, the blessings of God would come.

So the real issue of the Abrahamic illustration of Isaac in James **2:21** is did Abraham believe the promises God made to him enough to obey God? **Abraham was already saved and justified because of faith in Genesis 15:6, but did he believe the Word of God and want to obey the Word of God so he could be a friend of God?**

Well, the answer is in **verse 23**; Abraham believed God. Now what work is James referring to? What works proved that he had been justified? He believed the Word of God enough to obey the Word of God. Abraham believed that God would either supply a sacrifice or that He would raise up Isaac (Heb. 11:17-19). Abraham's faith was perfected (**v. 22**), which means it was brought to maturity by the fact that he obeyed God. That was Abraham's faith. As a result, as **verse 23** says, Abraham was called "the friend of God."

Now with that as a backdrop, we come to **verse 24** by Abraham's works of obeying the Word of God; he showed he was justified years later.

Now what does James mean and what did Paul mean? Paul said there are no works involved in justification. He drives home the point that man is justified by faith apart from any law works (Gal. 2:14). Paul also said that man is justified by faith and no works whatsoever (Rom. 4:5). Paul was very clear to point out that if works are in any way merged into grace, it is not grace (Rom. 11:6). Paul is speaking of judicial, forensic justification by faith alone. James is speaking of a lack of practical evidence of any grace or faith that has any desire to receive God's blessings or have God as your friend.

The Pharisees were saying they were right with God, but they had no interest in Jesus Christ and they had no interest in understanding and obeying the Scriptures, **specifically in regard to the sacrifice of the Abrahamic seed**. They refused to believe in Jesus Christ and James says your works prove you have never been justified.

You may be saved by faith alone. You may not have the blessings of God and have God as your friend unless you are willing to obey His Word.

ARGUMENT #3 - You say you are right with God, but you have no interest in protecting God's people. **2:25-26**

This story of Rahab comes from Joshua 2 and it really zeroes in on grace works. Rahab was a harlot who ran some sort of house of prostitution. When the spies of Israel went to her house, she hid them and then sent them away a safe way. In other words, she demonstrated grace to them. The reason she did this is because she realized they were the people of God.

She did not run her life by the letter of the law. In fact, after the spies left there is no evidence she closed down her house business. She had a faith in God and that faith promoted her to demonstrate grace to those spies. As a result, she ends up in the lineage of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5).

Now you may be saved by simply believing on Jesus Christ. But if you never have a desire to obey the Word of God and receive the blessings of God, your faith is dead. It has no life to it. Many people who say they are right with God have nothing more than a "dead orthodoxy." They have their works and their rules and their codes, but they have never experienced the saving grace of God and the proof of it is that they do not demonstrate obedient grace works.

James said what good is your faith. You are claiming you are justified, yet you don't care about people's needs, you don't care about the Word of God and you don't care about God's people.

That kind of faith is useless and dead.

The wonderful news of grace is that any sinner may believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. If you will do that, you will discover that the Holy Spirit will work in you and begin to do a grace work that will prompt you to love the Word.