



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 172

Faith and works – Throughout church history many have used the second chapter of James to dispute the doctrine of justification by faith alone, teaching that sinners are justified by faith and good works. In James 2:24 James writes, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone,” but in Romans 3:28 Paul writes, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Furthermore, both appeal to the patriarch Abraham as their prime exhibit (James 2:21; Romans 4:1-3). So how are we to understand and reconcile the seemingly contradictory teachings of James and Paul?

When talking about Abraham’s justification Paul refers back to Genesis 15:6, where by his faith Abraham was reckoned righteous before God. Thus, when Paul talks about justification he is answering the question, “How can sinful man be justified before a holy God?” He goes on to explain that justification is based not on man’s righteousness, but on a righteousness that is from God, a righteousness that is apart from the law or works (Romans 3:21; 4:6), that is, the righteousness of Christ, which the sinner appropriates by faith (Galatians 2:15-16; Philippians 3:9).

On the other hand, when talking about Abraham’s justification James refers back to Genesis 22, saying that Abraham was justified by works, by offering up of his son Isaac. This event took place many years after God had called Abraham out of Ur (Acts 7:2), and had declared him righteous (Genesis 15:6). Thus, when James talks about justification he is answering the question, “How can we know that someone’s faith is real?” James is saying that Abraham was “shown to be righteous” by his works.

Thus, though both Paul and James use the same word “justified”, they use it in different senses, talking about two entirely different things; and the context of their teachings determines the meaning of each. Paul speaks of justification in terms of a positional declaration of righteousness in the sight of God, which is by faith alone based on the righteousness of Christ; whereas James speaks of justification in terms of a practical demonstration of righteousness in the sight of men, which is by good works.

In context, Paul was dealing with legalists, those who believed they were right with God based on their keeping of the law; while James was dealing with antinomians, those who believed they were right with God based on their knowledge and affirmation of the gospel, and could live as they wished, denying the necessity of works, even sinning without restraint. But as explained in previous studies, saving faith consists not only of knowledge and affirmation, but also trust; and such a faith will result in a changed life, a life that loves God and others (Matthew 22:36-40). The Bible does not teach justification by the profession of faith; it teaches justification by the possession of faith (2 Corinthians 13:5; 2 Peter 1:3-11).

James challenges those who claim to be Christians but have no works (vv. 14-20). He is basically saying that if you have faith then show it, demonstrate it – by its fruit, by good works (John 15:8; James 1:22-25). James says that even Satan knows and acknowledges that there is one God, but he is God’s enemy, hating Him and His truth. Many claim to have faith, but if there is no life that matches their claim, then in reality they have no faith at all. In Matthew 7:16-20 Jesus says that a good tree, a saved person, will bear good fruit; if not, it is not a good tree, and will be judged (Matthew 3:8-10; James 3:11-12).

So it is clear that James and Paul are not contradicting each other; rather, they are dealing with two different questions. In reality they agree with one another with respect to these two topics (James 1:17-18; Romans 6:1-4; Galatians 5:19-24; Ephesians 2:10). Though works do not earn our justification, they will inevitably be the result of our justification. If good works are absent then faith is absent as well. The Reformation is that, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” Matthew Henry comments, “Faith is the root, good works are the fruits, and we must see to it that we have both. We must not think that either, without the other, will justify and save us” (WCF 11:2).