

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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| Series: | Scripture Memory (Ps. 32:1, 2) | | Pastor/Teacher |
| Number: | 29 | | Gary L.W. Johnson |
| Text: | Romans 4:1-8; James 2:24-26 | | |
| Date: | November 5, 2017 (a.m.) | | |

FAITH AND WORKS: PAUL AND JAMES ON JUSTIFICATION

John Piper, a very high-profile *Reformed* pastor, advocates that there are *two* stages in the Biblical understanding of salvation. First comes justification by grace through faith alone – Piper contends that this enables the believer to fulfill *other* conditions for entry into Heaven. He even talks of *maintaining* justification via sanctification. Scott Clark has helpfully pointed out that this is not the way Reformed Theologians, like Zacharias Ursinus (who drafted the Heidelberg Catechism), framed the matter. “Good works are *constitutive* of salvation. This is what I call the ‘is’ of good works. We are not saved because of good works. They never become the ground of salvation. We may be confident that ‘*medium*’ does not mean ‘instrument,’ since he was elaborating on the expression ‘*pars ipsius salutis.*’ This is the equivalent of the Westminster Divines saying ‘having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life’ (WCF 16.2). Good works are the fruit of the ‘saving graces’ (WCF 11.2). He continued to explain the relationship of good works to salvation by analogy with justification. Good works are necessary to salvation as they are necessary ‘unto righteousness’ (*ad iustitiam*) or ‘unto justification’ (*ad iustificationem*) or ‘in those being justified’ (*in iustificandis*), i.e., as a consequence of justification (*quam consequens iustificationis*), since sanctification (*regeneration*) is separately conjoined with justification. This was Calvin’s doctrine of the *duplex gratia Dei* (twofold grace of God) or Olevianus’ *duplex beneficium*. Justification gives rise to progressive sanctification, and sanctification produces good works as fruit and evidence of salvation.

“At the top of the next page, however, he hastened to add ‘but I do not use this form of speaking’ because it is ambiguous (which had already been said) and because ‘it gives birth to contentions and gives our adversaries opportunity for quibbling.’ He also did not speak thus because this way of speaking is not found in Scripture. It is prudent (*tutius*) to say ‘good works are necessary in those being justified (*iustificandis*) and in those being saved’ (*salvandis*). Ursinus was unwilling to say things about salvation (the broader concept) that he could not say about justification (the narrower concept). It is ‘ambiguous’ (*ambigue*) to talk about the necessity of good works in justification, since such a way of speaking may be understood to make good works prior or antecedent to justification (*ante iustificationem*), which way of speaking would overturn the material cause of the Reformation. He was unequivocally and irrevocably committed to justification *sola gratia, sola fide*. Neither was he willing to say that good works are a ‘cause of justification’ (*causa iustificationis*). Rather, he wanted to follow Augustine: Good works do not precede (*praecedunt*) being justified, but they follow the justified.

“From there he responded to the objection that good works are so essential to salvation that it is not possible to have salvation without them. In answer he reminded the reader of Heidelberg 87:

“87. Can they then not be saved who do not turn to God from their unthankful, impenitent life?

“By no means, for, as the Scripture says, no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, covetous man, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like shall inherit the Kingdom of God.’

“Therefore, he concluded, ‘good works are necessary to salvation,’ but he insisted on a distinction. They are, as he had already said and now repeats, ‘*pars salutis*’ (part of salvation). They are antecedent to salvation (*antecedens salute*) but they do not merit salvation. They are necessary ‘in those being saved’ (*in salvandis*) but they do not merit or cause salvation.”¹ The Heidelberg Catechism addresses this topic with great clarity:

Question 52. But why cannot our good works be the whole, or part of our righteousness before God?

Answer: Because that the righteousness, which can be approved of before the tribunal of God, must be absolutely perfect, and in all respects conformable to the divine law; and also, that our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Question 63. What! do not our good works merit, which yet God will reward in this and in a future life?

Answer: This reward is not of merit, but of grace.

Question 64. But does not this doctrine make men careless and profane?

Answer: By no means: for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

I received a flyer the other day in the mail advertising a new church in the valley. It began by contrasting itself with the so-called traditional church. “If in the past the guilt-ridden, rule-laden, hypocritical church experience has sent you running, then come check us out!” Inside the flyer the church emphasized its upbeat contemporary music, insightful comedy and drama skits, and positive, relevant message. It concluded by promising people that this church will not *scold* you or *judge* you or try to *change* you. Definitely a church for the times. There is a very real danger that confronts us today when it comes to trying to communicate the gospel to our times – the danger of giving people the impression that *faith* in Christ is simply a ticket out of hell and a means to self-indulgence. Antinomianism is rampant in our churches. One of the reasons is that our churches have completely forgotten the law of God. Three things happen when the law is eclipsed. First the foremost, the Gospel is obscured. Second (and this may surprise some people), legalism spreads. “A low view of the law,” said Machen, “leads to legalism, while a high view of the law makes a person a seeker after grace.”² Third, hand in hand with legalism goes antinomianism. All three of these are characteristic of much that passes for modern Evangelicalism. However, the charge of antinomianism has been used down through church history. Herman Bavinck points out that it was in fact thrown in the Apostle Paul’s face, “Even in Paul’s time, the doctrine of justification by faith alone was already misunderstood and accused of being antinomian (Rom. 3:8, 31; 6:1, 15; etc.).”³ The noted Puritan pastor Richard Baxter, in his attempt to guard against antinomianism, revised the Reformation doctrine of justification, insisting that we are *not* justified by faith alone (*sola fide*) but *also* by our love for Christ and by our sanctification – and that a Christian’s ongoing obedience is absolutely necessary to maintain justification.⁴ John Wesley took a similar course, teaching that justification only consisted in forgiveness of sins and is a condition in and out of which one can move, depending on conduct – it can be lost.⁵ The acclaimed 19th century evangelist Charles Finney said of the Westminster Confession of Faith article on justification based on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, “If this is not antinomianism, I know not what it is.” The legal transaction is unreasonable to Finney, so he

concludes, “I regard these dogmas as fabulous, and better befitting a romance than a system of theology.” The doctrine of justification, therefore, is “another gospel.”⁶ We must, like Ursinus, carefully understand the important relationship justification has with sanctification without falling into the error of antinomianism, or the equally evil nomianism.

Paul’s language in Romans and Galatians is crystal clear: justification is by faith alone – apart from the works of the law (or any other kind of works, cf. Ephesians 2:8, 9). What about those puzzling statements in the epistle of James, especially the one that categorically says: “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (James 2:24)? There seems to be a glaring contradiction between Paul and James. Some have even said that James is specifically refuting Paul’s teaching.⁷ For those who accept the Bible as the very Word of God, this is unacceptable. Scripture does not contradict Scripture.⁸ A careful examination of James will reveal that there is no contradiction between the two. Having said this, we must, however, be aware of a false harmonization. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, likewise seeks to bring both texts into harmony with their twofold justification. They consider the first justification (Paul’s teaching) to be an infusion of grace and a renewal of life in the new birth. The second justification (James’ teaching) they consider to be growth in the grace of justification in which, by means of works and merits, Christians grow (by sanctification) in their justification. In this scheme sanctification is unto justification. This is just the opposite of what the Reformers (and the Bible) taught – justification is unto sanctification.

I. THE SCOPE AND DESIGN OF JAMES

The scope of James is totally different from Paul’s, as a reading of the context makes clear. James is not dealing with the meritorious ground of justification – Paul is. James is contending with a type of antinomianism, which in effect is reducible to what we would call easy-believism. R. C. Sproul writes, “Clearly Paul and James are not occupied with identical concerns. Neither are they addressing the same problem. Paul is concerned with the theological issue of how a sinner may be considered righteous before the tribunal. He is expounding the gospel of justification. James’s concern is somewhat different. He specifies the question he is answering: ‘What good is it, my brothers, if someone says that he professes faith but does not have works? Can his faith save him?’”⁹

II. JAMES’S TERMINOLOGY

James and Paul do indeed use the same words in speaking of faith and justification, but they are not used in the same way.

A. *What Does James Mean by Faith?* Everything hinges on how this word is being used by James. Note the context: “If a man claims to have faith . . .” (2:14). The word translated “claim” in the NIV is *legēi*, which means “to say” or simply “profess.” The same thought is stated again in verse 19. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.” In this context, the word “believe” is being used in the sense of affirmation or assent. It is what I would call head-nodding faith. “What Paul means by faith is something entirely different; it is not mere intellectual assent to certain propositions, but an attitude of the entire man by which the whole life is entrusted to Christ. In other words, the faith that James is condemning is not the faith that Paul is commending.”¹⁰

B. *What Does James Mean by Works?* Again, we need to carefully distinguish what James means by works and what Paul means. Paul is referring to those things which are intended to earn or merit salvation by human effort. James is talking about that which is the fruit of faith, that which is evidence of genuine faith (which Paul likewise alludes to in Galatians 5:21).¹¹

- C. *What Does James Mean by Justify?* James's meaning is clear from his illustration of Abraham. Note that this is drawn from Genesis 22. Abraham's act in that passage is the demonstration of what is stated in Genesis 15:6. "The statement of Genesis 15:6 is seen as fulfilled, completed, incarnated in the concrete reality of Abraham's obedience of Genesis 22."¹² John Murray uses the terms *declarative* and *demonstrative*. Paul is referring to the *declarative* aspect of justification, while James employs the *demonstrative* aspect of justification. "If this import commends itself, then it is possible to interpret James 2:21, 24, 25 in this way, and the apparent discrepancy between the teaching of Paul and that of James would be considerably relieved. In any case, if we once admit that in some instances the accent falls upon the demonstrative notion as distinguished from the judicially declarative, then we have gone a long way in resolving what might appear at first to be open contradiction. For in James, the accent would fall upon the *probative* character of good works, whereas in the Pauline polemic the accent falls without question upon the judicially constitutive and declarative."¹³

CONCLUSION: James, contrary to Roman Catholic teaching, does not teach that Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6 was at first imperfect, incomplete and then gradually was progressively made full by his works. Genesis 22 gave evidence that Abraham's faith was real faith and had always been the right kind of faith, and so was completed. Faith, in the Biblical sense, is always validated as a living faith; i.e., it is fruitful and productive. If there had been no fruit forthcoming, Abraham's faith would not have been genuine and would not have counted for anything to begin with. "In short," writes Warfield, "James is not depreciating faith: with him, too, it is faith that is reckoned unto righteousness (2:23), though only such a faith as shows itself in works can be so reckoned, because a faith which does not come to fruition in works is dead, non-existent. He is rather deepening the idea of faith, and insisting that it include in its very conception something more than an otiose intellectual assent."¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ R. Scott Clark, The Heidelblog: *Did Ursinus Teach Final Salvation Through Faith and Works? (3)*, (October 26, 2017).

² J. G. Machen, *What is Faith?* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 141.

³ H. Bavinck *Reformed Dogmatics IV* (Baker, 2008), p. 186.

⁴ See C. F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (Moorehouse, 1966), pp. 154-177.

⁵ See I. Murray, *Wesley and the Men Who Followed* (Banner of Truth, 2003), p. 223.

⁶ See M. S. Horton, "Finney's Attacks on the Westminster Confession" in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century I*, ed. L. Duncan (Mentor, 2003), p. 393.

⁷ This position gained rapid acceptance in the 19th century due to the influence of F. C. Baur and the Tubigen school, in which Hegelian philosophy was used to analyze New Testament documents. This mentality is still very much with us as witnessed by the Jesus Seminar. They have announced that they will turn their attention to the epistles of Paul as their next project. What you will see is simply the Tubigen hypothesis dressed up in modern garb and trotted out as the latest in New Testament scholarship, i.e., the infamous "Jesus Seminar."

⁸ Calvin said in this connection, "It is sure that the Spirit is not in conflict with himself." *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (The Westminster Press, 1975), III, xvii. p. 11.

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker, 1995), p. 163.

¹⁰ J. Gresham Machen's *Note on Galatians*, ed. John Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 220.

¹¹ "It must be remembered," comments J. I. Packer, "that Paul is the only New Testament writer to use justify regularly for God's act of accepting man." *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (InterVarsity, 1981), p. 146.

¹² G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 136.

¹³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 351.

¹⁴ B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. P & R, 1968), p. 416.