

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	44		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 3:6-14; Romans 4:1-4; James 2:14-26		
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Faith and Works: Paul and James on Justification

24. Lord's Day

Question 62. 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, (a) 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. (b)

(a) Gal. 3:10 For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. Deut. 27:26 Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen. (b) Isa. 64:6 But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

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. (a)

(a) Luke 17:10 So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

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. (a)

(a) Matt. 7:18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. John 15:5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

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 up-beat 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 90's. 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 and 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.”¹ Third, hand in hand with legalism goes antinomianism. All three of these are characteristic of much that passes for modern Evangelicalism. This dramatically affects how we understand and proclaim the Gospel. 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.² For those who accept the Bible as the very Word of God, this is unacceptable. Scripture does not contradict Scripture.³ 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 the he professes faith but does not have works? Can his faith save him?’”⁴

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 intrusted to Christ. In other words, the faith that James is condemning is not the faith that Paul is commending.”⁵

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).⁶

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."⁷

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."⁸

¹ J.G. Machen, *What is Faith?* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 141.

² 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 the 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.'

³ 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.

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker, 1995), p. 163.

⁵ *J. Gresham Machen's Note on Galatians*, ed. John Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 220.

⁶ "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.

⁷ G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 136.

⁸ B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. P & R, 1968), p. 416.