

Route Sixty-Six

Part Fifty-Nine

James

Saving Faith

(John 5:39; James 2:14)

With Study Questions

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Saving Faith

(John 5:39; James 2:14)

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him (James 2:14)?

Introduction

Leading a Bible study made up of young Protestant believers, Roman Catholics and others who were relatively undefined in terms of their religious convictions, the subject came up of how one is saved. How do you get to heaven? It was remarkable how quickly the room was divided.

The Protestants spoke up first. We are saved by faith in Christ. Those of the Roman Catholic persuasion bristled a bit at that answer. "So, it doesn't matter how you live," they complained, "all you need is faith?" Contained in their objection was the, not altogether unreasonable, contention that trusting in faith alone, while living a life of intentional and besetting rebellion, seemed wrong-even hypocritical.

It took all of about three minutes for our young Bible study to unintentionally unearth the issue at the heart of the Protestant Reformation-salvation by faith alone. Of course, when one reads James, we learn that this issue goes back significantly further than the sixteenth-hundreds. The way James addresses this issue very early in the New Covenant church (James being one of the earliest written epistles) has been the source of no small controversy throughout all of history.

The confusion of how one finds peace with God goes back even further than James. It has been convincingly argued that the same muddled approach to salvation extends to the stitched-up fig leaves of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:7). Is James, as some have taught, contradicting the Apostle Paul's continual and emphatic assertion that we are "**justified**

(declared righteous in the sight of God) by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28b)? In other words, are we saved by faith alone?

By the Spirit and wisdom of God we will seek to answer that question before we adjourn.

Survey of James

Though the justification issue seems to grab the attention of those who read James, there is much more to this epistle than those thirteen verses in chapter two. James has been called the *Proverbs of the New Testament*. James is full of parallels and aphorisms. **“Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation” (James 1:9, 10). “For the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20).** The epistle contains short, easily recalled, punches of wisdom and counsel.

James is not written to a particular church but to the twelve tribes scattered abroad. Some understand this to be a metaphor for Christians in general who are, at some level, pilgrims and sojourners this side of glory (1 Peter 2:11). At the same time, the early Christians were scattered in a very literal sense. While Saul (later the Apostle Paul) was wreaking havoc for the church, we read:

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (Acts 8:1b. See also 11:19).

It is to a scattered and laboring church that James opens with words of comfort and encouragement that many of us have seized upon during seasons of strife in our lives.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

I have found this to be one of those injunctions we enjoy in theory but are feeble in practice. We don't mind trials just so long as we get to decide what they will be and how long they will last. This is reminiscent of how we so enjoy that Jesus was a friend of sinners until a particular type of sinner seeks to become part of our church or our life. What a wonderful promise we read in James, that we may be **"perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."** Yet, in order for that to be achieved, we must let **"steadfastness have its full effect."**

Perhaps realizing how difficult all of this will be, James calls us to ask God for wisdom, which He will generously and graciously provide (James 1:5). In our prayers and in our lives, we are to avoid doubt. This seems like an impossible request. Doubt is weaved into our new, even regenerate, fallen natures. Because of this, we often hear that doubt is an acceptable disposition.

Yet we must realize that doubt in God equals trust in something else (usually either the flesh or something intentionally unidentified). This waffling Christian James calls a **"double-minded man"** *dipsychos* (literally "twosouled"). It's been said that the double-minded person is one who buys a dozen doughnuts, puts them in the cupboard then prays they won't eat them.

Seeking to get to the heart of our matters, James exhorts his readers not to put too much stock on their stations in life, rich or poor, for we all have the same end (James 1:9-11). Instead of being concerned with some earthly, fleeting identity, we are to remain steadfast under trial, looking forward to the eternal crown of life (James 1:12).

James also bids that we take responsibility for our own behavior. It is not God who tempts us, he explains,

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (James 1:14).

This deadly cycle begins with something as seemingly benign as desire. We are called to **"flee...youthful lusts" (2 Timothy 2:22)**. Instead we tend to entertain them.

Toward the end of chapter one, James begins to touch on the whole, 'how are we saved' question. He begins by defining pure and undefiled

religion before God. We are called, not merely to be hearers of the word, but “doers of the word” (James 1:22). James does not avoid the word, religion, as is so common today. But he does define it.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

In chapter one we are told to avoid putting too much stock in our station in life, in chapter two we are told to avoid putting too much stock in the stations of other. Preferential treatment is to be avoided. I was part of a ministry years ago that sought to convert the more well-known and popular. It was not as if these popular people were more important, they would say, just more strategic. It seems that James’ counsel runs contrary to such thinking.

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him (James 2:5)?

In the almost thirty-one years I’ve been at this church, I have never, by design, known who donates or how much they donate, that I might not tiptoe through the tithers. It is advice I would offer all young ministers.

In the midst of this counsel, James brings forth what may have been a head-scratching proposition which seems to put us all on the same playing field.

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (James 2:10).

This statement on its own seems to militate against the idea that we are saved by our works. So, and this seems to be a point of confusion for many, in one respect all sins are the same in terms of salvation. As the Westminster Confession teaches:

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent (WCF, 15, 4).

Yet in another respect, some sins are more or less reprehensible in the eyes of God. Proverbs 6:16-19 provides a list when God particularly hates. We will finish by addressing the issue of justification at the end of chapter two, for now we move on the untamable tongue.

Simply put, our lack of ability to control our tongues can be devastating. One is hard-pressed to find more emphatic, forceful and descriptive language in all of Scripture!

And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell (James 3:6).

It is my own testimony that in my many years of ministry, the highest percentage of turmoil is a result of thoughtless words. It was quite common for us to confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed (WCF, 33, 1). Of course, word is a deed. But so common and egregious are sins of the tongue that it gets its own category. As Jesus taught,

For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45b).

Chapter three concludes with a distinction between heavenly and demonic wisdom. We all know worldly people with great worldly wisdom. They may offer great advice economically, artistically, even relationally, as far as it goes. But there is a wisdom **“from above” (James 3:17)** that ever recognizes the direction to which all things are to lead, the glory of God in Christ.

Chapters four and five contains numerous exhortations toward godliness. James addresses covetousness, wrong motives, undue friendship and influence with the world, along with an almost startling promise:

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you (James 4:7, 8).

Even a cursory understanding of the devil must cause us to pause at what a great victory Christ has won for us that the devil would flee! Seeking to help us keep perspective, James calls us to ever live our lives with the caption “**If the Lord wills**” (James 4:15). There are numerous offramps we might have no intention of taking (including death itself) to which God will direct us.

A man’s heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps (Proverbs 16:9).

So much anxiety, we have, regarding what *might* happen.

In his final chapter we are against putting too much faith in earthly riches while ignoring, neglecting and defrauding others. We are again called to patience with a reference to a farmer waiting for the fruit of the earth. We all love the fast-motion filming of a growing plant! But, in reality, we must be willing to wait days, weeks, months or longer.

The epistle concludes with a call for the church to call for the elders to pray and minister (James 5:14). We assign every member a elder in order to more faithfully fulfill this. Keep in mind, at least here, it is the responsibility of the member to make the call. James gives the value of confessing our sins to one another (James 5:16). It is here that we read that oft quoted verse on prayer.

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:16b).

His final word has to do with us seeking to turn back those who wander from the truth. A responsibility we all have if we are truly seeking to love the brethren.

Let us conclude by tackling the justification issue. Just in case we are growing weary and think this is no big deal, listen to what two of the finest minds in human history, and certainly church history, had to say about this. John Calvin said,

Justification is the main hinge on which salvation turns.

Martin Luther said it a little differently but with similar impact:

Justification is the article by which the church stands and falls.

Clearly the issue of being acquitted before God (which is what justification generally addresses) is of premiere import. Is James contradicting Paul? Such a concession would cast doubt on the veracity and singular source of authority within Scripture; that being the Spirit of God Himself.

Add to this that James utilizes the same biblical/historical figure as Paul to make his argument. Romans 4 and James 2:21-24 both reference Abraham. But it is worth noting that Paul's reference to Abraham being justified from Genesis 15:6 happened decades prior to James' reference to Abraham being justified in his willingness to offer Isaac (James 2:21; Genesis 22:9). Was Abraham justified in chapter 15 or chapter 22 of Genesis? Keep in mind that justification (when referring to being acquitted by God) is a single action by which we have peace with God (Romans 5:1).

This should clue us all in to the fact that James seems to be using the word "**justified**" *dikaiosynen* differently than the way Paul was using it. The entire context of James' argument is not whether we are acquitted of our sins before God by faith. The context of James' argument revolves around what that faith looks like. James' point is summed up well in verse fourteen.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him (James 2:14)?

Faith that does not produce obedience, is simply not saving faith. If you're sick and a doctor gives you medicine which allows you to walk, run, play and work, your ability to perform activities is not what made you well. It merely gave evidence that the medicine was effective. James' use

of the word justified is similar to the way Jesus uses the word in the gospel according to Luke.

Yet wisdom is justified by all her children (Luke 7:35).

What Jesus is saying here is that wisdom is shown to be wisdom by what it produces. James is saying that true saving faith is shown to be genuine by what it produces. But there is a monumental difference between saying that true faith produces obedience versus saying that we are saved by that obedience. We are saved by the blood of Christ and the blood of Christ alone!!

Nonetheless, James' point should be well taken in an era of easy believe-ism where it is commonly asserted that we can be assured of our salvation due to an uttered prayer apart from repentance. This seems to be something James is warring against. Repentance, in a very reductionist definition, simply means a changing of the mind *metanoeo*. Yet the Apostle Paul declared that we should not merely repent (change our minds) but perform deeds in keeping with our repentance (Acts 26:20).

James seems to be teaching that when we change our minds, we change our minds about everything: who we are, what we have done, what sin is, who God is, how we are saved, how we should live. We are saved by faith alone. But saving faith is evidence that God has given us a new birth and we are to function accordingly. As Martin Luther famously said:

We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

Questions for Study

1. How do you get to heaven (page 2)?
2. James has been called the *Proverbs of the New Testament*. Why do you suppose that is? Give examples (pages 2, 3)?
3. To whom is James written? How does that relate to his early words of comfort and encouragement (pages 3, 4)?
4. Do you count it all joy when you meet trials? Why or why not? What is it designed to produce (pages 3, 4)?
5. What does it mean to be double-minded (page 4)?
6. Discuss the deadly cycle of desire (page 4).
7. What does it mean to be a “doer of the word” (page 5)?
8. If you fail in one point of the law, you become guilty of all. What are the implications of such a statement (pages 5, 6)?
9. Is James contradicting Paul when it comes to justification? What is justification? Solve the apparent difficulty (pages 7-9).