

Works

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, at the beginning of this study of James, I talked about how there seems to be a contradiction between James and the Apostle Paul regarding justification.
- They both use Abraham as an example when teaching about justification. They both cite the exact same verse from Genesis 15. However, their teachings appear to be drastically different, contradictory even.
- Paul teaches that our justification is by faith alone, while James teaches that our justification is by works, not faith alone.
- Well, Augustus Toplady, author of the well-known hymn, Rock of Ages, once made an astute observation about this. He said, grace cannot be severed from its fruits.
- If God gives you St. Paul's faith, you will soon have St. James' works. Let me read that once more.
- [1 : 0 6] Grace cannot be severed from its fruits. If God gives you St. Paul's faith, you will soon have St. James' works. In other words, Paul and James do not contradict one another.
- They are simply talking about two facets of justification, two phases, two different kinds of justification that are not, believe it or not, entirely distinct and separate.
- One necessarily leads to the other. Let's consider what James says in James chapter 2. If you'd like to follow along, turn to James chapter 2.
- And I will begin reading at verse 14. James 2.14, James says, What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works?
- Can such faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed, but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it?
- [2 : 2 5] In the same way, faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. But someone will say, You have faith, and I have works.
- Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works. You believe that God is one, good. Even the demons believe, and they shudder.
- Senseless person, are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless? Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete.
- And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.
- In the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute also justified by works in receiving the messengers and sending them out by a different route? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.
- [3 : 3 8] Once again, James writes this letter primarily to confront us with our double-mindedness. Tragically, we can often be a very fractured people, and I mean fractured within ourselves.

Our devotion can be torn between God and the world, or God and our own selfish desires. We say one thing, and we do another.

We, for instance, may readily listen to God's word, but we fail to do it. We fail to obey it. We may claim to love the Lord. We may claim to love his people, but then we show favoritism and make all kinds of ungodly distinctions between us.

Again, I'll remind you what the Shema of Deuteronomy 6 says. This is a passage every Jew in James' day would have memorized as a child even.

In fact, the Lord told Israel, These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house, and when you walk along the road, and when you lie down, and when you get up.

[4 : 48] Bind them as a sign on your hand, and let them be a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates. In other words, this is so important that the Lord says, I want you to do everything you possibly can never to forget these words.

And here is, in part, what they were never to forget. God said, Listen, Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Never forget that Yahweh is a God of complete integrity. He has no inconsistencies in his person or his character. He is never hypocritical.

He is never double-minded. And then he says, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Our God of integrity calls and commands us to be people of integrity. He commands us to be singularly devoted to him. There should be no inconsistencies in us, no double-mindedness.

[6 : 01] But there often is, right? So that is what James confronts these early Jewish Christians with, and that's what he confronts us with. We are often fractured.

We are often inconsistent and hypocritical and double-minded and unstable. And I can't help but wonder whether James is actually thinking back to some of his own experiences.

You see, when Jesus began his public ministry, and he revealed himself as Emmanuel, God with us, most of Israel rejected him.

And their rejection of him really revealed something about them that was previously hidden. Namely, it revealed them to be hypocrites. They claimed to love God with all of their hearts.

They claimed to have singular devotion to him. In fact, the most prevalent and influential religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees, they were born out of a conservative movement years before that attempted to stop the spread of Hellenism in Israel and among the Jews.

[7 : 11] You see, when the Greeks took control of Israel, they wanted to convert the nation to their culture, to their religions, to their way of life.

And the Pharisees rightly stood in the way. They said, no, this isn't right. But the Greeks may have political power, but our first allegiance is to God.

We must obey God in all things. But then, 400 years passed. By the time Jesus came along, the Pharisees were not exactly what they used to be.

Now, they still had the appearance of being a righteous people. They still appeared to have singular devotion to God. But what happened when God in the flesh stood before them?

They rejected Him. They hated Him. And what did that reveal about them? Well, even before Christ came on the scene, Matthew 3 tells us that some of the Pharisees were coming to the baptism of John the Baptist.

[8 : 23] Matthew writes, When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

Therefore, produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don't presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones.

The axe is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. John could already see what others couldn't see.

These so-called righteous Pharisees were actually anything but righteous. They all thought they were safe and they were secure from any kind of condemnation from God, merely because they were Jews.

They were children of Abraham. And John says, What difference does that make? If your faith isn't genuine. If your loyalty and your obedience is little more than a show, what good is it?

[9 : 36] Where's your fruit? Augustus' top lady, what did he say? Grace cannot be severed from its fruits.

If there is no fruit, there must not be any grace. In John 5, some of the Jews confronted Jesus, hurling all kinds of accusations against him.

And Jesus replied, I know you, that you have no love for God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and yet you don't accept me.

Oh, they put on a good show of religion. But their rejection of Christ revealed something very ugly, very troubling. Jesus said, Your rejection of me, the one who has come in the Father's name, proves you have no love for God within you.

By rejecting him, they were rejecting God. Some of the strongest language Jesus ever used was reserved for the Pharisees.

[10 : 46] In Matthew 23, he said, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead, and every kind of impurity.

In the same way, on the outside, you seem righteous to people, but inside, you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. I've thought about this many times when visiting cemeteries.

A cemetery is kind of a strange place when you think about it. I mean, generally speaking, they are beautiful places. Assuming the grass is cut, there's flowers everywhere, even the monuments can be quite elegant.

It's almost always very peaceful in cemeteries, but it's also a place full of dead, decaying bodies.

Despite its beautiful appearance, a cemetery is really a vivid symbol of the consequence of sin. And that's how Jesus describes the Pharisees.

[11 : 54] They appear beautiful on the outside, but inside, they are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity. They appear one way, but in truth, they are something else altogether.

They are hypocrites. They were double-minded to the extreme. Well, I wonder whether James sees something of himself in all of this.

You see, there was a time when he was in the same position. He was a good Jewish boy with a good Jewish upbringing. He would have claimed to believe in God.

He would have known the Shema from his youth. He probably would have said, hey, excuse me, I'm a child of Abraham. I'm as saved as saved can be.

Yet we learn in the Gospels that he too rejected God by rejecting Christ. There's a moment at the start of John 7 when Jesus was moving through Galilee avoiding Judea because of the Jewish leaders who wanted to kill him, but it was time for one of the big Jewish festivals in Jerusalem.

[13 : 09] And the Lord's brothers, his half-brothers, that is, including James, presumably, are trying to coax him to go to the feast. His brothers said to him, leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples can see your works that you are doing.

For no one does anything in secret while he's seeking public recognition. If you do these things, show yourself to the world. Now, I don't believe for a moment they were being sincere.

In fact, the text then says, for even his brothers did not believe in him. They weren't coaxing Jesus to go to Jerusalem because they sincerely wanted him to reveal his glory to the world.

As far as they were concerned, he had no glory to reveal. They were effectively coaxing him to his death. And again, James is most likely among them.

James once claimed complete allegiance to God but actually rejected God by rejecting Jesus. In Mark 3, James and their family, they attempted to restrain Jesus because they believed, the text says, he was out of his mind.

[14 : 23] So James was the double-minded man at one time. It would seem he didn't become a true believer until after he witnessed the resurrected Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that after Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, then he appeared to over 500 brothers at one time, and then he appeared to James.

And the next time we see James is in Acts chapter 1 where he's with the apostles and the church together in Jerusalem. So we're led to believe that his conversion likely occurred after Jesus appeared to him.

So I think we can safely say there's something personal about this for James. He knows what it's like to be a hypocrite. He knows what it's like to be a double-minded man in the worst kind of way.

I mean, he lived for years with a mask over his face. Now, if we had seen him at the time, we probably would have said, well, there's a godly man who loves the Lord with all of his heart.

[15 : 33] He worships God. He gives his sacrifices in the temple. He keeps the commandments. But James would likely say of himself, in hindsight, of course, no, I wasn't a godly man.

I appeared to love the Lord, but I rejected him when I stood face to face with him. We were together for decades.

We slept under the same roof. I should have known, but I thought he was out of his mind. So as we read this letter, we should see that this comes from a man who knows double-mindedness in a profound way.

He knows firsthand what it's like to lack integrity, to be divided in heart. But we also see that he knows the grace of God.

This is not a man who rejects or contradicts Paul's teaching about salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. He was saved by grace alone.

[16 : 41] He put his faith in Christ alone. And when he addresses this matter of being justified by works, he's not contradicting Paul. He's effectively building upon what Paul would eventually teach through his writings.

You see, James is writing to those who profess to be Christians, right? He's writing to those who claim to love God with all of their hearts and trust in Christ for salvation.

He's writing to those who claim to have already been justified by faith. And now he says, let's see if your profession and your conduct match up.

Grace cannot be severed from its fruits. Let's see what kind of fruit you're bearing. And that will tell us what kind of tree you really are. Because those saved by grace through faith will bear the fruit of good works.

Pay attention to what he says at the start of this passage. It's subtle. The CSB says, what good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works?

[17 : 57] Can such faith save him? I believe the NIV uses similar wording. the ESV says, can that faith save him? You see, James clarifies that he's not talking about genuine faith in Christ.

He's talking about a so-called faith. Yes, faith saves. It is the instrument of our justification. But James chooses his words carefully here. He says, if someone claims to have faith, can such faith save him?

In other words, can that kind of faith save him? Can a mere profession of faith save him? Unfortunately, the old King James version doesn't translate this verse quite as clearly.

According to it, James asks, can faith save him? Well, that's a different question. Now, the context, even in the KJV, gives us clues, but it's more accurate to say that James is referring to a so-called faith.

Not the real thing. Not a genuine faith. but a kind of faith. Well, if a person has genuine saving faith, it should bear fruit in the form of works.

[19 : 14] According to Paul in Ephesians 2, for you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is God's gift, not from works that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should do.

The principle here is pretty simple. A living tree should bear fruit, and genuine saving faith should bear good works.

Now, what kind of works is James talking about? Well, we could just peruse his letter and find several examples.

In chapter 1, he talks about persevering through trials. He talks about obeying Scripture rather than merely listening to it. He talks about showing compassion and helping those in need.

Here in chapter 2, he talks about treating and judging everyone as God would, not showing partiality. Later in this letter, he talks about controlling the tongue, and being humble, and being truthful, and being patient.

[20 : 25] We could go on, but in short, he's talking about all of those works God has created us to do. All of those works that he has commanded us to do.

In his book, *Radically Whole*, David Gibson writes, real faith is living faith, active faith. I want you to know that faith grows hands and feet.

Faith climbs stairs, ties ropes, bends knees. Faith sweats, sends emails, cooks meals, plants churches, builds hospitals, flies to the other side of the world, and spins itself in servant form.

That's what saving faith in the Lord Jesus means. In short, real faith is a faith that works. But James sees a problem.

Now, I don't know how he knows this exactly because he's writing to Jews spread out throughout the world or Jewish Christians. Maybe he's heard reports, maybe he's witnessed it himself, but he sees many Christians professing to have faith without seeing the evidence of it in their lives.

[21 : 36] Now, to be clear, they likely had some appearance of Christianity, I would think. I mean, even the Pharisees could pass for God-fearing, God-serving people, but regarding the Pharisees, two things were missing.

First, while they were keeping certain parts of the law, they were clearly not concerned about other parts of the law. You might remember when Jesus said to them, you give a tenth of mint and rue and every kind of herb and bypass justice and love for God.

These things you should have done without neglecting the others. And second, for all of the works they may have done, Jesus accused them of essentially practicing empty rituals, going through the motions.

In other words, they were doing many of the right things, but they weren't doing them for the right reasons. How do we know? Well, Jesus quotes Isaiah and he says, hypocrites, Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said, this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

They worship me in vain. So you'll notice that the Pharisees, they honored God with their words, with what they said, their professions, and they worshiped God.

[23 : 02] To some extent, they were doing the right things, but something fundamental was missing. Their hearts. Their heart is far from me.

Well, we have a similar situation in the church. These Christians to whom James is addressing here, they are saying the right things. They claim to have faith.

They are presumably doing at least some of the right things, but there are some major holes. Enough that James can see them. There are troubling inconsistencies.

And similar to the Pharisees, I believe James is making the point that their lack of good works in so many important areas of the Christian life might actually be evidence that they aren't Christians.

This might be evidence that their hearts are far from God. They may not actually have the saving faith they claim to have. Can such faith save him?

[24 : 05] Well, the implicit answer is no. It cannot. According to Gibson, James offers two warnings here.

First, he warns of the danger of being all talk and no action. And second, he warns of the danger of being all thought and no action. And we'll see that. Verse 15, If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed, but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it?

Well, this is a remarkably simple illustration to show that words alone do not make someone compassionate. True compassion requires doing something, providing clothing, providing shelter, giving food, and so on.

And Gibson makes a really good point here about this. He says, Have you ever said to someone, let me know if I can help, in the knowledge that you expect the mere phrase itself to do some of the heavy lifting?

I have. Of course, it's not that the phrase itself is always wrong, but wouldn't it be better usually just to help? speech like this is our way of using our mouths to recognize a need, but not using our resources to solve it.

[25 : 31] He goes on to say, I find it so easy to say I'm praying for you, and so much harder actually to stop and pray. Well, in the same way, James says, faith, if it does not have works, is dead, being alone, by itself.

Now, once again, James is not suggesting true faith can exist without works. Instead, he's referring to whatever version of faith they claim to have.

This so-called faith is a dead faith. It doesn't actually exist. So, we shouldn't be all talk and no action, and we shouldn't be all thought and no action.

In verse 18, but someone will say, you have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works.

Now, this might sound a little confusing at first, but I don't think the phrase, which often appears in quotes in our Bibles, you have faith, and I have works, is meant to be someone's argument against James.

[26 : 45] In fact, this is kind of the point that James is making. You could almost think of this as something James himself is saying, but for one reason or another, he writes it in the third person.

So, it's like this. You have one person over here, he's doing works. You have another person over here, he's not doing works, but he claims to have faith.

So, the working guy says to the faith guy, okay, I have works, but according to you, you have faith, that's fair enough, but I also have faith, and I can prove it by the works I'm doing.

Can you? And to this, the faith guy can have no answer, because you can't see faith apart from the fruit it bears. Now, that may not stop the faith guy from arguing about it and defending himself.

You've probably heard something along these lines yourself. If you haven't said something like this yourself, don't judge me. You don't know my heart, you don't know what I believe, you don't know how strong my convictions are, and to that, James says, you believe that God is one.

[28 : 01] Good. Even the demons believe. And they shudder. Notice the allusion to the Shema here.

You believe that God is one. In other words, the faith guy claims to believe in the Shema. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And James says, good.

But what about the rest of it? What about loving this singular God with all of your heart, soul, and strength? What good is your belief in this singular God if it hasn't become singular devotion to Him?

Now, the latter part of verse 19 is quite the indictment. But James is deadly serious about this. This is not a low blow. This is not meant to just be an insult for insult's sake.

It's true. Even the demons believe in a singular God. In fact, their knowledge of the true God is evidently more accurate than those people to whom James is writing here.

[29 : 10] While they feel content to merely profess their faith without any evidence of it, the demons know enough about God to shudder. Now, what does that mean?

Why do they shudder? Well, they tremble in fear before God. Despite all of their rebellion, they know exactly who God is.

And they know their place before God. And they don't say like so many people do today, well, this is what God says about Himself, but, you know, I'd prefer to think of Him as...

No. They live in fear of the true God. Look how they responded to Jesus in Matthew 8 in the presence of Christ. Their immediate response was, what have you to do with us, Son of God?

Have you come to torment us before the time? They know His power, they know their place, and they know God has appointed a day when they will be judged, and there's nothing they can do about it.

[30 : 16] So the latter part of verse 19 is a terrible indictment to claim to have faith, to even think of yourself as having faith, but not showing any fruit of that faith, well, that evidently means the demons have a better understanding of God than you.

I don't know that there is anything in this world more dangerous than knowing about God, knowing about His Son, knowing about the Gospel, giving mental assent to it, accepting it mentally or intellectually, and identifying as a Christian, but having little or none of it change anything about us.

This is basically the Christian version of what the Pharisees did. They presumed themselves to be saved, but they were not saved. And frankly, the evidence was right in front of them the entire time.

I've mentioned that James draws heavily from the Lord's Sermon on the Mount, and I wonder whether Matthew 7 is on his mind here.

That's where Jesus said, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, neither can a bad tree produce good fruit.

[31 : 40] Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire, so you'll recognize them by their fruit. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name? Then I will announce to them, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you lawbreakers. You see, it's for this reason the Apostle Paul says test yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

Examine yourselves, or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you unless you fail the test. Peter writes, make every effort to confirm your calling and election, because if you do these things, you will never stumble, for in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

And James says, in verse 24, you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

[33 : 02] So the issue here is not how a person can be saved. The issue is whether someone who claims to be saved is actually saved.

And how can we know? Every good tree produces good fruit. they will have confirmed their calling and election through their actions.

A person is justified by works and not faith alone, James says, because genuine faith will never be alone. Grace cannot be severed from its fruits. So, if God gives you St. Paul's faith, you will soon have St. James' works.

Gibson says, James 2.14-26 is all about an unbreakable union, faith and works. And what God has joined together, let no church put asunder.

But that is our constant temptation, isn't it? We want to draw a line between faith and works that is so bold that we no longer see the connection between them.

[34 : 11] Now, on the one hand, it's positively vital that we understand the distinction between justification by faith and justification by works and there is an all-important distinction.

But as James teaches us here, there is also a connection and we don't want to miss it. I think part of the confusion around this subject stems from the fact that both James and Paul use Abraham as their example.

They both cite the same verse, Genesis 15, 6. Paul uses it to prove justification is by faith. James uses it to prove justification is by works.

So, quite naturally, we think there must be a contradiction between them. How can Abraham prove seemingly contradictory points? Well, here's what James says.

Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar? you see that faith was active together with his works and by works faith was made complete.

[35 : 17] And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Verse 22 in particular is very telling. You see that faith was active together with his works and by works faith was made complete.

There's that word again from chapter 1 complete. By works faith is made complete. Literally, faith is accomplished. It's made whole.

There's something unfinished incomplete about faith alone. Now upon hearing that we might feel a little uneasy thinking wait a minute wait a minute Paul was very clear in his writings that faith is sufficient to save.

Works have no part in it. We cannot be saved by works and that's 100% right. Furthermore, James agrees with Paul on this point.

[36 : 25] You see James is answering a different question. Paul answered the question how can we be saved? how can we be made right with God when we stand condemned before him?

But James is essentially answering the question what does it mean to have faith? How can we know we've been made right with God? And to that James says by works our faith is made complete.

Consider Abraham. Both Paul and James agree that Abraham believed God and his faith alone was credited to him as righteousness. He did not earn favor with God by doing one thing or another.

He was not initially nor was he eternally justified before God by his works. But there is a vital connection between his faith and his works.

You see God promised to make Abraham's offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. And through his offspring God promised that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him.

[37 : 38] This is going back to Genesis 12 Genesis 15 there was just one problem. He didn't have any children. So how is this promise going to be fulfilled?

Now from a human vantage point God's promise seemed kind of ludicrous. It seemed impossible. And yet Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

He believed it. But how do we know he believed God's promise? Did he merely say it? Lord I believe you. Sure.

It will happen. Did he merely feel it? You know in his heart of hearts? In his bones? He just knew it had to be true? Well all of that's probably the case but also it spilled out of him through his works.

Because he believed he did things he would have never done otherwise. And James offers perhaps the best possible example of this. wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac his son on the altar?

[38 : 57] Think about that. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his promised son. Apart from faith that was a crazy thing to do.

Utterly crazy. If he killed Isaac he was effectively ruining the plan God showed him. But because he had genuine faith in God he knew God would fulfill his promise no matter what.

He didn't have to understand how. At that particular moment it seems that Abraham thought that maybe God would bring his son back to life. After he was dead. He told his servants stay here with the donkey the boy and I will go over there to worship and then we both of us will come back to you.

He fully anticipated that somehow some way God would fulfill his promise. In short Abraham's works did not make him righteous before God but they were a natural and inevitable outgrowth of his faith.

James says for just as the body without the spirit is dead so also faith without works is dead. Can we really call it faith if we're unwilling to walk by it?

[40 : 23] As Gibson says living faith just has a way of moving walking talking and showing it's really alive. Abraham did what he did because he actually believed God and if we believe God if our faith is genuine we will too bear the fruit of obedience and good works.

It's inevitable. Grace cannot be severed from its fruit. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you for what insights we've been able to glean from your word today and I pray that you would help us to embody the faith we profess with genuine works that reflect your love and your grace.

I pray that our lives will be a testimony to the transformation you bring showing integrity and wholeheartedness in all that we do. Singular devotion to you Lord.

Guide us to live out our faith with actions that honor you and serve others and it's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Amen.