

James 2:20-26
James and Paul on Abraham's Salvation

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There are two writers in the New Testament who comment on Genesis 15:6, which says,

6 And [Abram] believed in the LORD, and [the LORD] accounted it to [Abram] for righteousness.

These two writers are the Apostle Paul and James, the brother of our Lord. Both these writers relate this verse to the doctrine of justification. Yet what they have to say about justification appears, on the surface at least, to be contradictory. In Romans 3:28, the Apostle Paul said,

28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Yet in James 2:24, James says,

24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

“A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” “A man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” How do you reconcile those two statements?

Back when I was in the eleventh grade, I was close to a girl who was raised in the Church of Christ. Because I was raised in a Baptist church, we had different understandings of the relationship of faith and works in salvation. I had her read with me some of Paul's teaching on justification found in the book of Romans. She admitted she didn't know how to reconcile Paul's teaching with some of her beliefs. Then she had me read with her some of James' teaching on justification found in the book of James. I had to admit to her that I didn't know how to reconcile what James seemed to be saying with my understanding of salvation. That is as far as we got in our discussion.

Now, some 40 years later, I believe I have, by God's grace, a better grasp of the issue. I believe I now, by God's grace, better understand what both Paul and James are saying in those two sentences I quoted earlier. If you extract these two sentences from their writings on justification and compare them side by side out of context, these two statements do appear to contradict. But if you study these two statements in their respective contexts, you learn that comparing these two statements is like comparing apples and oranges. The two statements, properly understood in context, address different issues. Instead of contradicting each other, the two statements, properly understood, complement each other.

Let me give you a totally different example of two statements which appear to contradict but which really don't. Let's say that there is a terrible lightening storm one night which does a lot of destruction. Let's say one bolt of lightening splits in two a huge

tree and another catches a barn on fire. The next day a child asks, What causes the destruction? Is it the bright lightening or the loud thunder? The answer is that the destruction is caused by the lightening alone apart from thunder. That is correct. The power of the lightening is what split the tree and caught the barn on fire. The loud thunder didn't directly harm anything. A second child then asks a totally different question. He asks if all lightening is destructive. The answer to the second question is no. It is only bolt lightening, which is always accompanied by loud thunder, which is destructive. The relatively quiet sheet lightening is harmless. It merely lights up the sky. Sometimes one hears a distant rumbling with sheet lightening, but never the loud crack of thunder. So the destruction is not caused by lightening alone apart from thunder. The sort of lightening which does not cause loud thunder doesn't strike the earth and never does any damage.

The answer to the first question is, The destruction is caused by lightening alone apart from thunder. The answer to the second question is, The destruction is not caused by lightening alone apart from thunder. The two answers appear to contradict each other, but they really don't. When the two answers are understood in the context of the two questions, both answers are true, and they don't really contradict each other. The first statement is saying that destruction is caused by the lightening alone. The second statement is saying that the lightening which destroys is never alone; that sort of lightening is always accompanied by loud thunder.

In a similar way, the teaching of Paul and the teaching of James on justification don't really contradict each other. Paul is emphasizing that salvation is through faith alone. James is emphasizing that the faith that saves is never alone. Paul is emphasizing that justification and sanctification are distinct. James is emphasizing that justification and sanctification are inseparable. Both men's statements are true. Paul and James are not antagonistic opponents facing each other with crossed swords. Paul and James are standing back to back fighting common enemies who are attacking them from different directions. Those attacking Paul are arguing that the saving work of Christ is not enough. Those attacking Paul are arguing that we must supplement the saving work of Christ with our own good works. Those attacking James are arguing that a barren dead faith can be genuine saving faith. Those attacking James are arguing that we can have a faith relationship with Jesus without its producing any good works in our lives. Paul and James are both defending the true gospel, but they are facing enemies coming from different directions.

When Paul says that we are justified through faith and not works, he is teaching that our saving union with Jesus is established solely through our looking to Jesus in dependent faith. We don't do anything to merit or earn or deserve this saving relationship. Paul is also teaching that the saving work of Jesus is totally adequate for our salvation. We don't do anything to finish out or to supplement or to complete the saving work which Jesus accomplished some 2000 years ago. In these senses, justification is through faith apart from our works.

James is addressing a completely different issue. James is talking about the genuineness of faith. Salvation is through faith, and a part of that salvation is deliverance from sinful living unto righteous living. Therefore genuine saving faith results in good works. Genuine saving faith bears the fruit of obedience. We are justified through works only in the sense that good works demonstrate that one's faith is genuine.

In our text for today, James argues his point about the nature of saving faith from the example of Abraham. I want to look at the salvation experience of Abraham and use it to illustrate three aspects of justification, which are imputation, declaration and demonstration. James emphasizes in our text for today only the last of these, demonstration, but I think it would be helpful to consider all three.

First, there is imputation. Imputation is reckoning the legal standing of Jesus to the legal account of another. Jesus' finished sacrifice is reckoned to another as the legal payment for that person's sins. Jesus' perfect obedience is reckoned to another as that person's legal righteousness before God. Imputation occurs once for all when a person experientially enters into a covenant union with Jesus. That happens when a person first savingly believes in Jesus. At that moment, a person is reconciled with God and ceases to be God's enemy. At that moment, a person makes the legal transition from divine wrath to divine grace.

When did Abraham first savingly believe? That would be back in Genesis 11 and 12 when Abraham first responded to God's call in faith. We read about this in Hebrews chapter 11:

Hebrews 11:8

8 **By faith** Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Because this is when Abraham first believed, this is when the saving work of Jesus as Abraham's legal substitute would have been reckoned or imputed to Abraham's legal account before God.

Now let's go to Genesis 15. At this point in his life, Abraham's faith in God's promise is significantly strengthened. It is here that we read:

6 And [Abram] believed in the LORD, and [the LORD] accounted it to [Abram] for righteousness.

Here we read a declaration about imputation. The most common meaning of both the Hebrew word and the Greek word translated "justify" is to declare that someone has a righteous legal standing. It is the opposite of condemnation, which is to declare that someone is guilty. In salvation, that legal declaration is based on the imputation of Christ's legal standing to a person as that person's legal Substitute. The actual imputation occurs only once at the inception of a person's covenant union with Christ through faith. Yet the declaration of the resulting righteous standing can occur again and again and again until the last day, when God's elect will be openly acknowledged and acquitted.

The question which naturally occurs to people is why God waited to make this initial declaration here in Genesis 15 if Abraham's faith dates back to chapters 11 and 12. I would like to suggest three reasons.

First, there is the progressive revelation of doctrine in redemptive history. People of faith may have been justified before Genesis 15, but Genesis 15:6 is the first mention of this doctrine in redemptive history. Nothing is said about Abraham's justification before Genesis 15 because the doctrine of justification is not introduced until Genesis 15. Genesis 15:6 is the first occurrence in the Hebrew Old Testament of the words translated "believed," "reckoned," and "righteousness," and is the first occurrence of the phrase translated "in the LORD." Almost the totality of this verse is ground breaking revelation. That would certainly explain why nothing is said about Abraham's justification before this point in redemptive history.

Second, there is the clarification of God's promise in Genesis 15. Here God makes very clear that Abraham's seed who will inherit the promised land will be a true biological descendent from Abraham. This is a promise which finds its immediate fulfillment in Isaac but its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. This point in time when God clarifies a promise which ultimately points to Jesus is an appropriate time to reveal the doctrine of justification. After all, the ground of justification is the historical work of Jesus.

Third, the delay of this declaration until this point in Abraham's life of faith makes clear that the doctrine of justification through

faith holds true throughout a person's life. Of course, justification is through faith when one first believes and has no good works. But what about later after a believer has had opportunity to live a life of obedience and has done many good works? Is justification then through works or through some combination of faith and works? No, justification is always through faith as the lone instrumental means. We see this from Genesis 15:6. Abraham had by then done many good works, but Genesis 15 says that it was still Abraham's faith in the LORD which is reckoned to him for righteousness. Abraham is declared righteous because his faith in the LORD has put him into a saving union with the Jesus to come. It is Abraham's faith as the instrument of union with Jesus which is reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.

Let's now go to Genesis 22, the passage about Mt. Moriah which James emphasizes. This is the point in history when Abraham most dramatically demonstrates the genuineness of his faith. Let's read Genesis 22:9-12:

Genesis 22:9-12

- 9 Then [Abraham and Isaac] came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood.
- 10 And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.
- 11 But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

12 And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for **now I know that you fear God**, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

The Angel of the LORD said regarding Abraham, "Now I know that you fear God." This fits so well with what James was teaching:

James 2:18

18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

This is the demonstrative aspect of justification, and it involves good works. We must remember that good works are not the ground for the believer's new righteous standing before God. The ground is the alien righteousness of Jesus, the foreign righteousness of another and not one's native righteousness. The ground is the life of Christ and the death of Christ. We must also remember that good works are not the instrumental means of union with Jesus. That union is experientially effected solely by faith, solely by looking to Jesus for a new righteous standing before God, solely by resting upon Jesus alone for salvation. What role then do good works play in justification? Good works are the visible demonstration that one's faith in Jesus is real. Good works are the roaring thunder which proclaim to the world, "This is the bolt lightening of saving faith and not the sheet lightening of a bare profession."

In Genesis 22, Abraham's faith bears fruit which openly, visibly demonstrates the genuineness of his faith. James discusses Abraham's dramatic obedience at Mt. Moriah not as something in addition to his faith and independent from his faith. No, Abraham's obedience is the confirming consequence of his faith. James says this act of obedience is faith's working with works. James says this act of obedience is faith's coming to maturity, faith's coming to completion, faith's coming to fulfillment and fruition. Abraham is justified through works in the sense that his works demonstrate the genuineness of his faith. And this is important because genuine faith is what puts one into a saving union with Jesus and His righteousness.

In the parable of the soils, the thorny soil plant and the stony soil plant and the good soil plant all represent people with a profession of faith. Yet only the good soil plant represents a true Christian with a regenerate heart. For a time, all three plants look the same. It is when the good soil plant begins to bear fruit that it sets itself apart outwardly from the other two plants. This is what Abraham was doing at Mt. Moriah. He was bearing the fruit of obedience and demonstrating that he was a good soil plant, that his faith was rooted in a regenerate heart and was thus true saving faith.

At Mt. Moriah, Abraham was justified in the demonstrative sense. The fruit of obedience born at Mr. Moriah demonstrated that his faith was genuine and thus that he really was in a saving union with Jesus and His righteousness. In this sense, good works are the outward, visible demonstration that a person is justified. Good works, the product of sanctification, demonstrate

that a person is justified because justification and sanctification are inseparable. Justification and sanctification are distinct, but they have this in common: the saving union with Jesus realized through faith causes them both.

James then refers to Rahab and her experience. She too demonstrated by her actions that her professed faith in the God of Israel was genuine. She first hid the two Jewish spies and then helped them escape the city of Jericho. She did this at great personal risk. Her actions justified her in the sense of demonstrating the reality of her faith. Perhaps James mentions her because she is so different from Abraham, the rich and respected man. If this principle that obedience proves the genuineness of justifying faith is true for individuals as diverse as Rahab and Abraham, then it must be true for every true believer.

James closes this section with a contrast between dead faith and living faith. When Paul uses the word “faith,” he is talking about living faith. James uses the word in a broader sense which encompasses both living faith and dead faith. Only living faith justifies, and living faith demonstrates its life through its fruits. A faith which produces no fruit is like a human body without the human spirit. It is dead, and it accomplishes nothing. This dead barren faith is the faith of demons, and it does not save. Living faith which bears the fruit of obedience is the faith of Abraham and Rahab, and it is saving faith.

Let me conclude by asking and answering some questions. What is the basis for God’s accepting you as righteous in His sight? It

is the finished, perfect work of Jesus. How do you have access to this saving work of Jesus? Through faith alone. Salvation is not earned or merited or deserved. Salvation is by grace through faith. It is the gift of God and not of works lest anyone should boast. How do you know your faith is real? By its fruits.

Look to Jesus alone for your salvation. And pray that Jesus will so strengthen your faith in Him that you may increasingly see the fruit of faith in your life. The visible fruit of salvation is deliverance from sinful living unto righteous living. As we see Jesus delivering us in this objective and tangible way, we are assured that our inner faith is genuine and that our saving union with Jesus is real.