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Sermon Notes

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Paul and James: Justification by Faith or Works?

Romans 4:4-5, James 2:14-26

In 1422, Roman Catholic authorities condemned an English man for heresy and ordered that his body be burned and his ashes scattered over the Swift River. His name was John Wycliffe and his crime was simple: he translated the Holy Bible from Latin into the English tongue of the common man and woman. A Catholic bishop said this about Wycliffe's crime:

“That pestilent and most wretched John Wycliffe, of damnable memory, a child of the old devil, and himself a child or pupil of Antichrist, who, while he lived, walking in the vanity of his mind...crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue.”

The sentence was indeed carried out... Wycliffe's body was burned and his ashes spread over the Swift River... the most amazing aspect of this event was that Wycliffe had been dead for forty-four years!

Exactly one hundred years later, the German Reformer Martin Luther did the very same thing for his German countrymen... he translated the Bible into common German.

The Roman Catholics also condemned Luther's arrogance. The Pope's council ordered that Luther's Bibles be burned!

Why did the Roman Catholics dig up and burn the bones of a man dead for 44 years? Over 100 years later, why did they order the Holy Bible itself to be burned? Answer: they feared nothing so much as the Bible in the hands of common people: “They'll interpret them however they choose... the Scriptures are impossible for any but the most trained to read!” They denied the basic clarity of Scripture!

Luther did not deny that there are tremendously difficult aspects of Scripture. With the German Bible he published introductions to each book of the New Testament to help the people understand them better... he gave special attention to the Book of James!

I. Martin Luther's Struggle with James

A. Luther's central discovery: Justification by Faith Alone, Apart from Works

1. Romans Catholic system: works righteousness... slavery!!
2. Freedom came: Justification by Faith Alone

Luther's freedom: Romans 1:17 "The just shall live by faith"

Thus: translating Romans 3:28 "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith **ALONE** apart from works of the law." He added "alone" to the text

Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian Man* [1520]: "Unless a man is already a believer and a Christian, his works have no value at all. They are foolish, idle, damnable sins, because when good works are brought forward as ground for justification, they are no longer good."

- a. fasting, prayers, deeds of service, candles lit, hymns sung, pilgrimages to Rome... all of them are as filthy rags in God's sight when done by a sinner for justification
- b. good works must never be brought forward for justification
- c. Key Reformation slogan: "Justification by faith **alone** apart from works"

Adding a word, judging Scripture! Came to a head with translation of Bible in 1522

B. Luther's edition of the Bible: 1522

Luther's introductions: Book of James an "epistle of straw"

The obvious basis for the controversy: Romans 3:28/4:5 vs. James 2:14-26

Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Romans 4:5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

James 2:24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Our question this morning: is there a disagreement between Paul and James on the issue of justification by faith alone?

II. The Nature and Purpose of Scripture

A. Church Built Upon this Foundation

Ephesians 2:19-20 *God's household [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*

Matthew 7:25-26 *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock."*

B. The Scriptures Are God's Words Written

2 Timothy 3:16 *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness..."*

2 Peter 1: 21 *... prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

Saint Augustine put it this way: "What scripture says, God says."

C. The Scriptures Are Perfect, Unbreakable, and Permanent

1. Perfect

Ps. 12:6 *And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.*

2. Unbreakable

John 10:35 *"The Scripture cannot be broken."*

3. Permanent

Matthew 24:35 *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*

D. Scripture Given to Lead Us to Salvation in Christ

2 Tim. 3:15 *the Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

E. Therefore, Scripture cannot contradict itself

2 Cor. 1:18 *But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No."*

God cannot tell us one thing in Paul and something completely different in James. The key is, how can we harmonize two seemingly contradictory texts?

III. The Challenge of Language

Lawyers have invented a whole new style of talking: legalese

A. God Chose to Entrust Our Salvation to Words... and RISK MISUNDERSTANDING

1. The First Scripture: written in God's own hand on tablets of stone
2. From then on, God spoke to Prophets who wrote His words down
3. Words must be learned... or there is ignorance; words must be interpreted, or there is error
4. God's Spirit sent to illuminate His Scripture

John 16:12-14 "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. ¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.

God has decided to entrust our salvation is a record of words which must be read and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit

B. God Chose to Entrust Our Maturity to a Message of Difficult Words

1. Scripture divides itself into two categories: Milk and Meat
2. Milk is simple: a child can understand
 - a. God is big and powerful
 - b. God made everything
 - c. God loves people
 - d. People do bad things
 - e. God sent His Son
3. Meat is not simple: it must be chewed upon to be digested

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Romans 11:33-34 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ³⁴ "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

C. Interpretation Required

2 Timothy 2:15 “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

It should not surprise or dismay us that we have to work hard to understand the Scriptures properly.

IV. The Central Issue in Paul: How can a Sinner Be Right with God?

A. Justification is a legal declaration of righteousness before God

B. Righteousness comes from outside us... it is Christ's righteousness; and it is ours only by faith

Romans 1:17 “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is from faith to faith; just as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

C. Obedience to the law—or any good works—can have no role whatsoever in our justification

Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

D. If our works could justify us, why in the world did Christ have to die on the Cross???

Gal. 2:21 “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained by the law, Christ died for nothing.”

E. Paul is very strong on this, totally rejecting any effort at all in the matter of justification

Romans 4:4-5 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but according to debt. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Summary: Paul states again and again that nothing we can do by effort or obedience or struggle can possibly justify us for our sins... only faith in the shed blood of Christ can do that!

James asks the next question: what kind of faith justifies, and what is the evidence of that faith?

V. The Central Issue in James: What Kind of Faith Justifies?

A. James: Dealing with a Claim of Faith... standing on the outside looking in

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

1. A man CLAIMS to have faith...
2. What kind of faith saves?... “Can **such a** faith save him”

B. Underlying Problem: A Discrepancy Between Claim and Life

1. Jesus addressed this openly in the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

2. Not those who say but those who do... the same lesson from James
3. Consistent problem today: false claims... Pray the prayer, walk the aisle!!!

Divorce rates; entertainment; spending patterns; attitudes about controversial issues... all the same in the church as in the world!!

C. James' Question: What Kind of Faith Saves?

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

1. Negative answer: What Kind of Faith Does NOT save

DEAD FAITH DEMON FAITH USELESS FAITH

- a. sometimes as useful to know the counterfeit as the real thing
- b. Romans 4 & Gal. 5 describe the REAL THING

Romans 4:19-22 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰

Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith WORKING through love.

James 2 describes COUNTERFEIT

2. Dead faith (vs. 15-17) [hypocritical, no love for others]

James 2:15-17 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

- a. saving faith is not a dead faith
- b. saving faith acts powerfully in love toward a needy person
- c. true faith always results in a growth in love

Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

- d. love gets extremely practical concerning needs seen around it
- e. faith which never moves into outward shows of love is dead

3. Demon faith (vs. 19) [orthodox, but no love for God]

James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.

- a. dry, orthodox belief system
- b. demons may be more orthodox doctrinally than most of those in this room
- c. Devil knows the Bible backwards and forwards... [tempting Jesus in the desert]
- d. demons immediately knew who Jesus was

Luke 4:33-34 In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, ³⁴ "Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!"

Believed in the humanity of Jesus ("Jesus of Nazareth")... Believed in the deity of Christ ("Holy One of God")...Such a "faith" did not, however, lead them to LOVE God... they hate God

True faith isn't **dead**... it loves neighbor as itself; true faith isn't **demon**... just dry orthodoxy but deeply loves God with all its heart

4. Useless faith (vs. 20) [fruitless... disobedient!!]

James 2:20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

- a. true faith produces a powerful effect on a life
- b. Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac
- c. his faith and his actions were working together... that's the way true faith is

James 2:22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

- d. this vindicated his faith as the genuine article

James 2:23-24 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. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

- e. for this reason God spoke and vindicated that faith

Genesis 22:12 "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

This is the faith that justifies... this and no other

VI. Conclusion

Illus: Top of the Empire State Building in New York city... observation platform; if you travel to one edge to look at the view, you are restrained by a fence; if you travel to the opposite side to look at the view, there is also a fence; the fence is there for your protection

On the issue of justification, Paul erects one fence to protect us: our works will never have any place whatsoever in making us right with God... only the blood of Christ can wash away our sins

On the issue of justification, James erects the other fence: the faith that justifies is a certain kind of faith: it is not dead, it is not demon, it is not useless... it always produces good works.

These two fences protect us from error... arrogant boastfulness or lazy self-deception

In Paul's defence: Paul also erected the same fence James did!!

Romans 1:5 "The obedience that comes from faith"

Romans 16:25 "...so that all nations might believe and obey him."

Romans 6-8 Entire section proves that true salvation always results in obedience to the spiritual law

1) Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength

2) Love your neighbor as yourself

Let Martin Luther resolve it for us: *We are truly justified by faith alone apart from works; but the faith which justifies is never alone... it always results in works*

If you claim to have faith in Christ and live like the devil, you are self-deceived... not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of our Father who is in heaven.

2 Corinthians 13:5 Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!

Don't you recognize that Jesus Christ is in you, unless, of course, you fail the test!"

LORD'S SUPPER a perfect time for self-examination

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