

“By works [is] faith made perfect”

David Burges

The Epistle of James, with its teaching that “faith without works is dead”, has sometimes been regarded as contradicting the principle of justification by faith, but when carefully considered is shown to be in full harmony with Paul’s teaching on what is necessary for salvation.

THE WORD OF GOD could not be clearer. Men and women receive forgiveness of sins and inherit the hope of eternal life, by the grace of God, through their faith, that is, by believing the promises God has made in His Word, centred in the Lord Jesus Christ. They cannot obtain forgiveness by their works, that is, by any deeds they might perform seeking to secure God’s favour:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8,9);

“for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood” (Rom. 3:23-25).

What, then, are we to make of the teaching of the Epistle of James on faith and works, and its seeming contradiction of the Apostle Paul’s words quoted above? Controversy has repeatedly arisen over the source and nature of faith and the relationship of works to faith, and much of that controversy has related to James’ words, some of which form the title of this article.

Practical issues

The most common assessment of James’ epistle is that it is very practical. Readers are able to identify with many of the situations and issues that the inspired author deals with, and find practical advice and exhortation for their own behaviour in daily life. Thus James defines true religion as being expressed in care for the disadvantaged and in personal separation from the world’s corrupting influence: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless

and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (1:27).

It is noteworthy that in this summary the apostle was recalling issues very prominent in the Law of Moses, namely care of the fatherless and

widows, and separation from corrupting influences:

“Thou shalt not pervert the judgment of the stranger, nor of the *fatherless*; nor take a *widow’s* raiment to pledge . . . When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the *fatherless*, and for the *widow*: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands” (Deut. 24:17,19);

“When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee . . . thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: neither shalt thou make marriages with them . . . For they will turn away thy son from following Me . . . For thou art an *holy people* unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (7:1-6).

These are just two of many examples presented by James, and indeed by all the New Testament writers, in which the ethical principles of the Law, expressed in practical actions, are carried over into the new covenant of grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus James issues a warning against partiality, or respect of persons, again echoing the prohibition of the Law:

“My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons” (2:1ff.);

“thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour” (Lev. 19:15; cf. Deut. 1:17).

Hebrews 11—the ‘faith’ chapter

The Letter to the Hebrews presents us in chapter 11 with a “cloud of witnesses”, the examples of faithful men and women recorded in Scripture, in order to encourage true believers to “run with patience the race that is set before [them]” (12:1). Through ten closely argued chapters, the inspired apostle shows us the superiority of the new covenant, based on faith in Jesus Christ, over the Law of Moses, whilst in the rest of the letter the readers are encouraged to bring their faith to fruition in Christian living. In particular, chapter 11 is designed to illustrate the Divine principle that “the just shall live by faith” (10:38, quoting Hab. 2:4).

What is remarkable about the examples chosen is that all are commended by reference to the things that they *did*, that is, their *works!* The apostle lists fourteen individuals or groups of people whose faith “wrought with [their] works, and by works was . . . made perfect” (Jas. 2:22) (see [table](#) opposite). Some of these are impressive actions, as the building of the Ark by Noah, or the destruction of Jericho through the obedience to God’s instructions of Joshua and the children of Israel. Others scarcely seem at first sight to warrant inclusion in the list—for instance, Enoch’s translation, or Isaac’s blessing of his sons only after he had been deceived—until we consider the lives of faith that lay behind their actions.

We are twice informed (vv. 2,39) that by their active faith these men and women all “obtained a good report” (literally ‘had witness borne to them’). They are consequently rightly described as a “cloud of witnesses” to the power of faith. Together with our Lord Jesus Christ, “the author and finisher of our faith” (12:2), they provide inspiration and encouragement to us likewise to be active in lives of faith.

To do so, he demonstrates, would be to negate the fundamental principle of the Law, expressed in the second great commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Jas. 2:8, quoting Lev. 19:18; Mt. 22:39, etc.). To have respect of persons would be to transgress this law and so to commit sin (v. 9).

Can faith alone save?

It is in this very context that James launches on his famous passage concerning faith and works. He is arguing that the faith in Jesus Christ, which constrains his followers to obey his command to “love thy neighbour as thyself”, carries the innate requirement to demonstrate that in practice, for instance by not showing “respect of persons”. And this is broadened into the more general point that it is hardly possible for believers to show that they have faith merely theoretically, without demonstrating it in their deeds:

“What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye

warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (2:14-17).

James reveals, by means of a simple, practical example, that faith, that is, wholehearted assent to the doctrines of Christ, cannot by itself bring salvation unless it is the springboard for Christ-like behaviour. Faith that is merely theoretical, that is not reflected in a changed life, that does not love its neighbour as itself, is described by the inspired apostle as “dead”. This in no way usurps the truth that faith is the primary virtue, that which brings imputed righteousness; it simply underlines the fact that faith must be genuine, and that it can only be seen by the effect it has on the life of the believer.

Indeed, it is plain that God *tests* the faith of His chosen ones, by the many situations that providentially arise in their lives, in order to confirm and strengthen it. The way in which they respond to those situations, and the consequent actions they perform, are the “works” of which James speaks. Unfortunately, ‘good works’ are

Hebrews 11		
Verse	Character	Work of faith
4	Abel	Offered a better sacrifice
5	Enoch	Was translated (because he pleased God)
7	Noah	Built an ark
8	Abraham	Obedied his call and “went out”
9	Abraham	Lived in the land of promise, as a foreigner
11	Sarah	Bore a child when past age
17	Abraham	Offered Isaac as a sacrifice
20	Isaac	Prophesied of Jacob’s and Esau’s futures
21	Jacob	Blessed Joseph’s sons and worshipped
22	Joseph	Prophesied of the Exodus and his own burial
23	Moses’ parents	Hid Moses from Pharaoh’s edict
24	Moses	Refused to be called son of Pharaoh’s daughter
27	Moses	Left Egypt
28	Moses	Kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood
29	Children of Israel	Passed through the Red Sea
30	Children of Israel	Brought about the destruction of Jericho
31	Rahab	Escaped the destruction of Jericho
32	Gideon, Barak, etc.	Conquered kingdoms, obtained promises, etc.
35	Women and others	Received the dead raised, were tortured, etc.

often mistaken simply for deeds of charity, acts of kindness and so on, whereas the expression in Scripture encompasses a much wider definition. Acts of charity, when motivated by faith, are indeed good works, but so are personal witness, conscientious objection to military service, avoidance of evil and many other responses in daily life to the teaching of the Master (see the [box](#) and [table](#) on Hebrews 11, above).

Abraham—justified by faith or works?

In the matter of faith and works, as in other matters, both Paul and James bring forward Abraham, the friend of God, as the prime example. God’s call of this man, and his response to that call, form a pattern to be imitated by believers of all ages. However, many critics, notably Martin Luther,¹ have seen a direct contradiction between the words of Paul and those of James concerning the salvation of Abraham:

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law . . . For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed [had

faith in²] God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 3:28; 4:2,3);
 “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son

1. Martin Luther, who introduced the doctrine of *‘sola fide’*, salvation by faith only, taught that faith is not a man’s free assent to God’s promises but a direct gift from God. Consequently he rejected believer’s baptism and continued to insist upon baptism of infants, believing that the former placed too much emphasis on the will of man. According to Luther, the gift of faith is accompanied by the Holy Spirit, and works flow inevitably from persons so endowed. He writes: “Yes, since faith alone suffices for salvation, I need nothing except faith exercising the power and dominion of its own liberty . . .”; “In doing these works . . . we must not think that a man is justified before God by them, for faith, which alone is righteousness before God, cannot endure that erroneous opinion”. He considered that the Epistle of James contradicted the teaching of Paul in Romans, and famously referred to it as “an epistle of straw”, although later he apparently withdrew the comment. See, for instance, articles at www.lessonsonline.info/LutherandJames.htm and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistle_of_James.
2. The Greek words for ‘believe’ (*pisteuō*) and for ‘faith’ (*pistis*) have the same root.

upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (Jas. 2:21-24).

Yet a careful examination of the two passages reveals that the two inspired authors are discussing different aspects of the process of justification, by which men and women are counted righteous by the grace of God, and thus the two passages are in full accord.

In the Romans passage, Paul is contrasting justification by faith in Jesus Christ with the Jews' misplaced trust in justification by the works (deeds) of the Law. They imagined that the meticulous performance of the rituals of the Law could by itself bring salvation. This had rightly earned the censure of the Son of God: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Mt. 23:23). Of course, Abraham preceded the Law and could not have been commended by it. Rather, he was justified by his faith, gaining forgiveness of his sins by believing implicitly the promise of God that he would have a son, and descendants as innumerable as "the stars of heaven", although he and Sarah were both past the age of child-bearing. Even the rite of circumcision was only ordained *after* Abraham had shown his faith in the promise of the seed (Rom. 4:9-11,19-21; *cp.* Gen. 15:5,6 with 17:10).

James, however, takes the process forward many years (perhaps twenty-five) from the time when it is recorded that Abraham believed to the time when he was called upon to sacrifice Isaac, the fruit of the promise, on Mount Moriah. The record informs us that in this remarkable episode "God tested Abraham" (Gen. 22:1, NKJV), and clearly it was Abraham's *faith* in the seed promise that was being tested. Here it is evident that Abraham's outstanding faith enabled him to grasp the sacrificial knife in complete confidence that God would not counteract his promise through Isaac and so would, if necessary, raise him from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19). And in this, James declares, "his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (2:22, NIV). Abraham's faith was shown to

be fully effective and acceptable to God, by his offering of Isaac.

Moreover, James comments, in the process "scripture was fulfilled" (v. 23), which is an expression normally used for the fulfilment of prophecy. It seems as though the statement that Abraham "believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness" at the time of the 'stars of heaven' promise (Gen. 15:5,6) awaited its fullest expression and completion on Mount Moriah. Abraham's faith was perfected by his work.

The relationship of Abraham's justification by faith and by works was expertly summarised by Brother John Thomas: "Paul says [Abraham] was justified by faith; and James, that he was justified by works. They are both right. As a sinner he was justified from his *past sins* when his faith was counted to him for righteousness; and as a saint, he was justified by works when he offered up Isaac . . . The two stand related as cause and effect; faith being the motive principle, it is a justification which *begins* with the remission of sins that are past, and is *perfected* in obedience unto death".³

Conclusion

Careful examination of Bible teaching about faith and works and their relationship reveals a pleasing harmony in the expositions of the relevant passages. Faith in God's promises, centred in the Lord Jesus Christ, is shown to be the essential virtue which brings men the forgiveness of sins that they could not achieve by any deeds of their own. It is notable, however, that this justification is secured by the action, or work, of baptism, in obedience to the command of Jesus.⁴ This is the focus of the Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Romans.

Having been thus forgiven, believing followers of Jesus are obliged to obey his commandments, to demonstrate by their works that theirs is a living faith, acceptable to their Master, and hence maintain their state of justification. This is the teaching of the Apostle James, exemplified by the case of Abraham, and for good measure by that of Rahab the harlot of Jericho too (2:25).

In this regard it is important to note the considerable number of Bible passages which state

3. *Elpis Israel*, 15th Edition, 2000, pp. 278-9.

4. Some '*sola fide*' evangelicals claim that baptism is not necessary for salvation since it is a 'work' (personal communication).

that the saints will be judged “according to their works”.⁵ So, at the judgement seat of Christ, works are seen to bear a direct relationship to the reward of eternal life in God’s Kingdom. May we so order our lives, acting daily upon our faith, that in that day we may hear from the lips of our Lord the words, “Well done, thou good and faithful serv-

ant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Mt. 25:21).

5. See, for example, 2 Chronicles 15:7; Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12; Jeremiah 17:10; Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 2:3-11; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 20:12,13; 22:12.

“By grace are ye saved through faith”

Eric Marshall

Grace is the undeserved favour of God, Who provides salvation from sin and death in His mercy and not because of any merit of our own; but grace is only available to those who respond of their own free will to the call of the gospel and seek to shape their lives in accordance with God’s will.

THE TITLE of this article is part of Paul’s statement in Ephesians 2 that reminds his readers that the salvation available through Christ Jesus is only possible because God is very gracious and rich in mercy. He illustrates the extent of this mercy thus: “But God, Who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (vv. 4-7).

What is grace?

Grace is the unmerited favour that God displays in His actions, particularly those to do with salvation. It has the idea of a gift, although other Greek words are actually translated ‘gift’ in the AV. When Paul is speaking of the collection that the ecclesia at Corinth was making on behalf of the poor saints at Jerusalem, he says, “And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem” (1 Cor. 16:3). The word translated “liberality” in this verse is the usual word (*charis*) translated ‘grace’ (139 times) throughout the New

Testament. Clearly the collection was a gift and an act of graciousness.

When in his second epistle he returns to the arrangements for this collection, he describes it as “this grace also”, and by citing the example of Jesus’ giving encourages them to be generous in their giving: “For ye know

the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:7,9). Though Jesus did not have any money to give, he did give himself to a life of service and self-denial in his role as Saviour. The enrichment that believers will receive is beyond merit on their part. There is a present aspect to this that may be summed up in Paul’s words, “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8, RSV), and the blessing of Divine providence operating on our behalf. The future aspect will be realised in eternal life in God’s Kingdom.

Paul continues his description of the process of salvation in Ephesians 2 as follows: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (vv. 8-10). There is a contrast made between “grace”, which is unmerited (“it is the gift of God”), and “works”, which might be done to merit salvation. Not, of course, that the disciple is not required to do “good works”, for they are to be the outcome of faith.

This contrast between grace and works is also discussed in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. In il-