

S E S S I O N F O U R

CAN FAITH ALONE SAVE?

*James 2:14-26***I. INTRODUCTION**

This is the most difficult and controversial passage in the whole book. Why? Because the words "save" and "justify" are used in this passage in such a way that causes tension with the teaching on "justification by faith" found in many of Paul's epistles. It is presumed by most commentators that the word "save" means *salvation from the penalty of sin*. Some (but not all) will also presume that "justify" means the same thing here as the way Paul uses it in Romans and Galatians.

Hence, the usual tactic is to try and resolve the tension between James and Paul. This is usually done by arguing that there is no tension between the two; James is merely trying to say that those who have true saving faith will show this by their works. That is, genuine saving faith will result in good works, and good works are the test of a person claiming to truly be saved. Quite frequently, the expression is used, "Faith alone saves, but faith that saves is never alone." Moo (though he does not understand "justify" in this passage in the Pauline sense), is typical of those who follow this approach:

His point, rather, is that genuine biblical faith will inevitably be characterized by works. . . . James, in a sense, proposes for us in these verses a "test" by which we determine the genuineness of faith: deeds of obedience to the will of God.

This is basically the position of those who advocate "lordship salvation." Personally, I disagree with this interpretation, and will seek to argue that James has something else in mind.

II. QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ASKED

- A. Is James talking about "saving faith" in this passage or about general faith in the life of the Christian?
- B. When James uses the word "save" in 2:14, should we automatically assume that he means "salvation from the penalty of sin" as happens at the new birth? Can the word translated "save" be used in other ways?
- C. When James speaks about being "justified" in 2:21,24,25, is he using this word in the Pauline sense of "justification"? Can this word be used in other ways?

How To Arrive At A Solution: In order to answer these questions, we *must* put aside our theology and carefully study how each of these words are used in the Bible. In most cases, any given word will have a range of meanings. Once we know the range of meanings for a word, our goal is to decide which meaning the author himself probably had in mind. The most crucial factor in making this decision is the context. Has our author used these terms elsewhere in the near context? What has been his concerns and the argument of his presentation up to this point?

III. CLARIFICATION ABOUT THE PAULINE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

- A. The word "justify" is used in Paul's epistles (especially Romans and Galatians) in a very special sense to speak of what God does in *justifying sinners by faith*. The Greek word used is δικαιόω, the same word that James uses.
- B. Crucial Verses: Romans 3:28; Gal 2:16
- C. The normal meaning of δικαιόω in these verses:
Not to make someone righteous, but to declare someone righteous. Usually appeal is made to the use of the term in Deut 25:1 (LXX)—God justifies the righteous. He doesn't make them righteous, but *declares* that they are righteous. God can declare a man righteous, because he has trusted in Christ and God has forgiven him of his sins. Yet this justification from God is not because the man is actually *righteous* himself. In fact, he is not (Rom 4:5). Though he is ungodly, God can declare him righteous.
- D. There are three things true about this Pauline doctrine of justification:
 - 1. It is what God declares him to be, not what he actually is in reality.
 - 2. In no way are works involved in this justification at all.
 - 3. The only thing that gains this status is faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ and His work for us on the cross.
- E. There is no way that this Pauline sense of justification can be reconciled with Jas 2:24.
- F. The Bible does not contradict itself. Therefore, James must be talking about something different than Paul. Probably, δικαιόω has another meaning which James uses.

IV. JUSTIFICATION FOR JAMES

- A. The word δικαιόω is used 39x in the NT and 51x in the LXX.
- B. A word study of this term will reveal that it has several shades of meaning. Examples:
 - 1. It can mean to "give someone justice" (Ps 82:3; Mic 7:9; Isa 1:17).
 - 2. It can mean to "vindicate" (Mt 11:19).
 - 3. It can have the meaning "shown to be right" about something (Isa 43:26).
 - 4. 1 Kgs 8:32 is a good example that probably comes close to what James has in mind—to "affirm that someone is righteous (or acting righteously) in character." This makes sense, because James was concerned from the outset of his epistle about righteous character (not *righteous standing!*).

V. CRUCIAL OBSERVATIONS

- A. Throughout the epistle, James has written to those who are genuine Christians, and there is no reason to think that he is suddenly writing to *non-Christians* (i.e., those who merely profess Christ) when he comes to 2:14.
 - 1. Consistently refers to them as "brothers" (1:2, 19; 2:1, 5).
 - 2. He referred to their "new birth" in 1:18 as a result of the gospel.
 - 3. He stated in 2:1 that they already had a faith in the Lord Jesus.
 - 4. The details within the passage (vv 14-26) favor the view that Christians are in view.
 - a. James once again refers to them as "my brethren" in 2:14.
 - b. In the illustration of 2:15-16, the one who is ignored is a "brother or sister."
- B. Notice that this passage in Jas 2:14-26 is very closely related to the preceding context. In Jas 2:1-13, the author was concerned that the poor in the church were being overlooked, and that some were playing favorites to the rich. The author concluded in

2:12-13 that *showing mercy* was highly valued in God's sight. This reinforced what he had said about orphans and widows in Jas 1:27. Now, notice how this concern continues in our present passage as seen in the illustration of vv 15-16. Significance: the common theme of *showing mercy* (especially to the less fortunate) has been a common thread running through these paragraphs since chapter 1. In the previous paragraphs, James's concern was to see true believers, by faith, to act on the Word by being a doer of it.

- C. There is no reason to automatically assume that James is concerned about "saving faith" in 2:14.
1. The Bible speaks about "saving faith," but also about a growing faith in the life of the believer (e.g., 1 Pet 1:6-7; 2 Thes 1:4).
 2. Prior to this passage, James has mentioned "faith" four times. Although he does refer to "saving faith" in Jas 2:1 (where he states that the readers have already done this), the other three references refer to faith in general in the life of the Christian (1:3,6; 2:5). James has been concerned with the testing of the Christian's faith and whether or not he is going to act upon the Word of God by being a "doer."
 3. Look at how James uses "faith" in 2:22! This is not "saving faith," but Abraham's ability to trust the Lord. Notice that it also speaks about the perfecting of Abraham's faith.
 4. Conclusion: James is not dealing with the issue of testing to see if a person has *saving faith*. He knows the readers already have saving faith. He is concerned that they are living by faith, and that their faith in the Word results in "works."
- D. What does James mean by the question, "Can *that faith* save him?"
1. Clarification: although the *NASB* translates "that faith" and the *NIV* has "such faith," the Greek text has no modifier. It merely says, "Can faith save him?" Justification for the translation "that faith" is usually based on the presence of the definite article before faith (ἡ πίστις), but "faith" with the definite article is used repeatedly in this passage and not translated elsewhere in this way (e.g., vs 17 has ἡ πίστις).
 2. The word translated "save" is the Greek word σώζω
 - a. This word is used most frequently of "salvation from the penalty of sin" which happens at the moment of regeneration (e.g., Titus 3:5)
 - b. However, the word has numerous other meanings
 - (1) The basic meaning is to "deliver" (e.g., Jude 5)
 - (2) This can be used for a physical deliverance from danger (e.g., Acts 27:20,31)
 - (3) It can be used for our ongoing sanctification, i.e., being delivered from the power of sin (e.g., 1 Cor 1:18; 1 Tim 4:16?—insure salvation)
 - (4) It can be used for a Christian's eschatological salvation (1 Cor 3:15; cf. 1 Cor 5:5, 1 Pet 1:5,9)
 - (5) It can be used in the sense to "make someone well" or to "recover" (Jn 11:12; Acts 4:9; 14:9)
 - (6) Preserving of women through child-bearing (1 Tim 4:16)
 - (7) To safely bring someone to a destination (e.g., the Lord to His kingdom, 2 Tim 4:18)

3. Since James is already writing to true believers, he probably does not mean salvation in a soteriological sense. We ought to consider another possible meaning.
4. Conclusion:
James has used the word σωζω already in Jas 1:21 (cf. 5:20). As we argued there, it meant to deliver a person from the vicious cycle of sin & spiritual death. Since these passages are parallel in thought (being a doer of the Word), this meaning of σωζω is most likely. His point: if a Christian is not becoming a "doer" of the Word and his faith does not result in works of mercy, how can he be *saved from* (i.e., delivered from) the cycle of sin that leads to spiritual death? Such a Christian will not endure in faith so as to become spiritually mature and complete. Rather, his faith is so shallow that he will remain defeated in sin.

VI. STRUCTURE (with interpretative comments)

A. The Proposition Stated: Christian's cannot afford a dead faith that does no works (2:14-17)

1. Primary Argument (2:14)
A Christian's faith that does no works is a useless faith, and will not be able to deliver him from the cycle of sin & temptation that leads to spiritual death.
2. Illustration of "dead faith" (2:15-16)
Notice that James is thinking primarily of *acts of mercy* on the less fortunate, especially in the Christian community
3. Conclusion: a Christian's faith that has no works is essentially dead

B. A Defense of the Proposition (2:17-26)

Note: Beginning at vs 18, James resorts to an imaginary objector as a way of defending the proposition he has stated. Note that both vs 17 and vs 26 have the thought "faith without works is dead." This suggests that vs 17 is a conclusion to verses 14-17 and that vs 26 is a conclusion to vv 18-26.

1. An Imaginary Objector's Argument (2:18-19)
James uses a common literary device of an imaginary objector to make his point about faith and works. There is debate about where the objector's statement ends, but an observation of other examples (Rom 9:19-20; 1 Cor 15:35-36; and 4 Macc 2:24—3:1 suggests that the objector speaks in vv 18 & 19. [*NIV*: only 18a; *NASB*: all of 18].
2. James's Response to the Objector's Argument (2:20-23)
Note: the word "you" in vs 22 is singular, but in vs 24 it is plural.
 - a. James's Rebuke of the objector (2:20)
 - b. James's Appeal to Abraham as an illustration (2:21-23)
A faith that is being *perfected* will naturally be linked with works
3. Restatement of the Argument (2:24)—righteous character is affirmed by works
4. Extended Illustration based on Rahab (2:25)
5. Final Conclusion (2:26): faith that does no works is sterile and unproductive

FINAL LESSONS FROM OUR STUDY

“Works” do not prove or confirm that we are Christians, but it is a very worthless faith that does no works. We won’t get very far in the Christian life with a faith like that. To endure trials and become a doer of the Word will require a growing, active faith. Without this, we will remain defeated in sin and experiencing death.