

Why a Justifying Faith Must Be Accompanied by Good Works

James 2:14-26

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 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? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, *“You have faith; I have deeds.”*

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God! Even the demons believe that - and shudder.

You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 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 what he does and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent

them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

In Christ beloved hearers: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

There are many passages in the Bible that may appear strange to us and at the first glance may seem to contradict each other. It is just such passages that scoffers are constantly making use of in their attempts to prove that the Bible is not reliable, and that it does not represent the will of God.

We believe and confess that the entire Bible is the word of God and that it therefore must be infallible. We believe that the different passages in the Bible can no more be contradictory than God can contradict himself.

At first glance, the passages from today's text may seem to contradict each other when compared with the rest of scripture. But if we compare scripture with scripture, then we will find that they are far from being contradictory - they are in perfect harmony with one another.

But how can our text (which appeals for the necessity of good works) harmonize with the teachings of the Apostle Paul who so strongly emphasizes justification by faith alone? How can the following passages from Romans be brought to harmonize with our text? **"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." Romans 3:28** How can that passage harmonize with our

text when it says: **“Ye see then that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” James 2:24** Have we not here two contradictory passages? Many have claimed that they are contradictory and scoffers have made use of just such passages in their attempts to prove that the Bible is not to be relied upon because one passage will disprove the statement of another.

But these passages are not contradictory, but rather are in perfect harmony. We believe and confess that a person is justified (saved) by faith without the deeds of the law. We also believe and confess that a justifying faith cannot be without works. Now in order that this may become clearer to us, we will (with the aid of the Holy Spirit) consider:

Why a Justifying faith must be accompanied by good works

I Because faith without works is dead

II Good works are necessary fruits of a true faith

In our text we read: **“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” James 2:14** The Apostle does not mean to say that such a person has the true faith. He is rather saying that this person fancies or declares to have faith. Notice that the Apostle does not say: What does it profit if a man has faith but rather: *“What doth it profit if a man say he hath faith?”* In this statement it is implied that a person who professes faith but has no works really has no faith, because it is a dead faith. Such a

faith, a faith consisting in the mere professing and a mere outward show, will profit nothing says the apostle.

There are those even within the Christian Church whose Christianity consists merely in professing and in appearing to be Christians. They may appear to us as though they were very pious because they go to church, sing and pray to God. These people may often talk about things pertaining to religion as well and yet they are not true Christians because they do not have a living faith. This type of faith is dead and will profit them nothing. A dead faith may seem profitable because it gains the good opinion of other people. Outwardly, such acts of faith are deceptive and by doing them a person is really committing a sin, despite their very pious appearance. They may deceive other people and are really committing a sin by their pious appearance. To us, all things should be accounted profitable or unprofitable in that they either forward or hinder our salvation.

A dead faith does not proceed from the heart and consists in the mere profession of Christ. Such behavior does not gain salvation because it does not bring anyone into union with Christ. On the other hand, it hinders salvation by entertaining a false hope that one can be saved by a dead faith. A dead faith will not let us see the necessity of obtaining the living faith. A living faith brings us into union with Christ and can therefore save us for eternity.

A mere profession of faith will not profit or save anyone but a living faith can. Anyone who has a living faith relies for salvation alone

through Jesus Christ and his crucifixion. A true and living faith really and truly trusts in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ alone for salvation. A person who has such a faith will be saved because faith builds salvation not on based on one's good works but rather on the good works of Jesus Christ. By trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation this person appropriates, make his own, Christ's redemptive work.

A true and living faith is always accompanied by good works, **"...faith without works is dead."** **James 2:15-17** As mere good wishes toward our neighbor is not true love, so faith without works is not true faith. We may have pity upon the needy, wish that the naked had cloths and that those who are hungry would have food, but if we do not give them clothing and food, if we do not give them what they need (although we are in a position to do so) we do not love them. We may say that we are charitable, talk of it, boast of it, but if we do not prove it by deeds and by helping the poor, our charity consists in empty words. **"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."** **I Corinthians 13:1** It is with faith that we may profess our faith and appear to be good Christians - but if we do not prove it by works, by doing good, our faith is no more true than love without charity.

We read furthermore in our text: **"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."** **James 2:26** As the body is known to be dead, if we perceive no vital actions flowing from the soul, so is faith dead if it does not make itself known by activity. As a living body must be united with the soul, so a living faith and good works

cannot be separated. As a body is dead as soon as it is separated from the soul, so a faith is dead when it cannot bring forth good works.

Many are tempted to rest in the mere profession of faith and expect to be saved by it. But let us remember what the Apostle says that mere profession of faith will not profit the soul. Many are also inclined to rest in a mere historical faith, in believing that there is a god, yes they also believe that God the Father sent His son Jesus Christ to earth to save everyone. But they do not appropriate it, do not make it their own because it does not make any change in their minds or kindle any love in their hearts. They only believe in a general way that Jesus came to pay for the sins of all people. These people do not allow God to come and take possession of their hearts and take their sins away. We must all have this historical faith but it is not enough and will never save us. We read in our text: **“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.” James 2: 19** The devil also believes that there is a God and that Jesus Christ came to earth to save all people - yet what will this profit him? Nothing. Neither will we be saved if our faith consists in mere profession or in merely believing the historical facts concerning God. This faith does not save because it is dead, because it does not bring us into union with Christ. A true faith saves because it brings us into union with Christ. By trusting in Christ we appropriate His redemptive work. God looks upon us as though we had done what Christ has done for us, Christ's good works become our own.

II

That the true and living faith must be accompanied by good works we also learn from when Christ says: **“I am the true vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5** Here Jesus Christ likens Himself to a vine, and all the Christians, all the true believers to its branches. Now a living branch united to a living tree must bring forth green leaves, must bear fruit because the sap which it receives from the trunk makes it necessary for it able to do this. So, it is with the true believer, one who is united with Christ, he or she is one with Him and the strength and love which is received from Christ makes it possible to do good works and to bear fruit. As a living branch must bring forth fruit from the sap received from the trunk, so a true Christian must, as a result of the love and strength received from Christ, do good works.

Now, it is true that it is faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ alone that saves, for good works will not save us. But we can at the same time say that works are necessary because it is an utter impossibility to love this true faith and not love works.

Thus we learn from the Apostle Paul that a person is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. Yet this information does not contradict what is taught in our text, namely that works are necessary.

As a result of this union with Christ, a true believer will, as we have heard, always do good works for a living faith always brings forth good

fruit. But what are these good works? What do they consist of? In one word, we may say that they consist in doing God's will. A true believer will in the first place love God although with grief and sorrow admits that he or she does not love God as one should. As a result of this love, a true believer will try to live up to God's commandments, even though these commandments may seem ever so unreasonable.

An example of such a working faith is seen in Abraham's life. God had promised him that he would become a great nation and that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. He was told that the Savior Jesus Christ would be born in his family. When Sarah was over 90 and Abraham more than 100 when Isaac, their son, was born. Isaac would, according to the words of God, be Abraham's rightful heir and through him Abraham should become a great nation. To Abraham's family, through Isaac, the Savior would be born. But in spite of all this, years later Abraham received the command from God that he should take Isaac, his only rightful heir, and offer him on the altar as a sacrifice. But if he did offer Isaac, how would Abraham then become a great nation? How could then all nations be blessed through him? How could the Savior then be born in his family if Isaac died? Abraham could not understand it, but he had faith in the Lord. Abraham knew that what God had promised He would be able to keep, even though the sacrifice of Isaac was made.

So Abraham took his son and would have offered him as a sacrifice upon the altar if God himself had not prevented it. By doing this Abraham proved that he had a living faith. His faith did not consist

in mere words, but as faith ready to do good works and ready to live up to the commands of God. For this reason God said to Abraham: “... **because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.**” **Genesis 22:16-18** A true believer then will, because of his love to God do the will of God, keep his commandments.

Another fruit of true faith is love toward our neighbors. A true believer will love his or her neighbors. A true believer will love not only friends but also enemies. This love will not be perfected while here on earth for Christians will be tempted to falter and fall in every respect. But all true believers will strive most earnestly to become more and more perfect in their love toward other people and they will not forget to pray to God for the grace to do this. They will strive to do to others as they would have others do unto them. A true believer's main object here on earth is to further their own salvation. Because of this their most earnest desire is that others will also be saved. Now to save the souls many people and to bring them to Christ is the greatest mission the church here on earth has to perform. Every true believer will therefore help to carry on this work of the church. A Christian will do this in the first place because God has commanded it. Love toward others will induce a true Christian to do all in one's power to support

this blessed work of the church. A Christian will give to the church of one's earthly means, not reluctantly but willingly and gladly. A believer will consider it a favor from God to be allowed to help to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A believer will in the first place do all in one's power that the precious gospel of Jesus Christ may be preached to all those living in one's own country. This will help will continue to those living in the outskirts that are so situated that they cannot themselves support a minister of the Gospel - it is these people we help when we give to the home mission.

But Christian's do not only love other people living in their own country - but those living beyond the ocean in foreign county are also the object of love and prayers. Christians love those who are sitting in darkness and who have never heard the word of God, they most earnest desire is that they too will be saved and enter into the kingdom of heaven. If a Christians cannot go to these countries to preach the word of God, they will gladly and willingly give of their earthly means in order that missionaries might be sent out.

There are indeed those who wish that the word of God might be preached throughout the whole world, yes, they may pray to God that this may come to pass. But when it comes to a test, many are not willing to do anything in order that this might be realized.

There is a story told of a man who was considered to be a good Christian and very pious. Every day he included in his petitions a prayer for foreign countries so that the word of God might be preached

to them, that they too might be saved. One day his son came and told him that he now had decided to become a missionary and to go to a foreign country in order to preach the Gospel. *"What!"* said the father, *"will you become a missionary?"* To this I can never give my consent. Think of the many dangers and hardships a missionary must go through. Think of what it means to leave your father and mother, sisters and brothers to go out into a far distant land where there are few chances that you will ever return! No, I will never give my consent to this." Very much surprised at this the son answered: *"How is it then that you every day prayed that the word of God might be preached to foreign countries that they too might be saved! I thought your heart would be filled with gladness and joy by hearing of my decision."*

There are many who resemble this man, many who wish that the Gospel would be preached in foreign countries and who pray that this may come to pass. But when it comes to a test, they are not willing to do anything for the same foreign mission. Now and then they may give a few dollars to the mission, but even from this they would rather be excused. This is not the kind of fruit that springs out from a living faith.

We have said that love toward our neighbors is one of the fruits brought forth by a true and living faith. We have shown that the highest form of love is to help others learn of Christ and do all in our power that they may enter into eternal life. But if we love our neighbor, we will also see to it that others do not suffer want even in this world if it is in our power to prevent it. A true believer will help the poor in the community and remember that God has placed these poor within

reach. A Christian can then express thanks toward God by giving to those in need especially since they have been committed into his charge by God Himself. Christians can help to establish and maintain orphans homes in order that the father and motherless may be taken care of. They will also help to support other institutions of charity as some of the many fruits that are brought forth by a true and living faith.

It is true, there may be those who do all these things and yet are not true believers. They may do it because they wish to do something meritorious, something that God must pay them for and they can thereby earn their salvation. But these are not good works in the sight of God, but on the contrary are sin. For the word of God says: “.... **Everything that does not come from faith is sin.**” **Romans 14:23** Only those things are good works in the sight of God that spring out as a fruit of a true and living faith.

May God give each and every one of us a living, working faith - a faith that brings forth good works. May God give us the grace so that our light will shine before others so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven. Amen

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:14-16

We thank you our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for what you have done for us. We thank you that your holy life has kept the law for us and that your suffering and death has paid for all our sins. As you have looked after us oh Lord, we can come into union with you and be benefited by what you have done for us only through faith.

Now we ask you Lord to give us this true and living faith – a faith which makes itself known by doing good. We also ask that you do not let not let any of us be deceived by trusting in a false and dead faith. Hear our prayer and bless to this end the preaching of your word. We ask it of you in your own blessed name. Amen