

# The Letter of James

## *A Better Way of Living*

### Session Four: Answers/Opinions : Faith and Works: Paul and James

We were reflecting on whether Martin Luther was correct in thinking that James and Paul contradicted each other on faith, by trying to see what exactly James believed about faith, Justification and actions.

We saw from Galatians 2:1-10 that Paul believed he and the leaders in Jerusalem were teaching the same gospel message.

1. What does James say about the development of faith in 1:2-4?  
He wants Christians to know God better and draw closer to him. He says this happens as faith grows and matures, aiming for the perfection in Matthew 5:48, even if only Jesus attains that perfection.
2. Faith is a gift from God. It is due to his grace. He chose us, but he did so for a reason, he had work for us to do on his behalf, cf John 15:16
3. Listening to the word of God and not acting on it goes to the heart of what James feels about faith and deeds. Someone receives the wonderful gift of faith and does nothing with it. He is like the man in the parable who was given one talent and went and buried it. Matthew 25:24-25. I don't know about being thrown into outer darkness, but it certainly warrants some gnashing of teeth.
4. How does this story about preference connect to faith? It is how some believers behave. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century I think wealth commanded great respect and poverty distain. Even more than today! James saw a complete lack of Christian love in this injustice and inequality. They were meant to be representing Christ on earth, but were a disgrace to him and were making a mockery of their claim to faith. Romans 6:15-18
5. Can faith without deeds save a person, whom God has already justified? I think the question is save them from what. Christ by his faithfulness saved everyone from the slavery of sin and death. So I think James is thinking of that final day of judgement. 1 Peter 4:5; Romans 14:11-12; James 2:12. Everyone is still accountable, although exactly what that involves at judgement we don't know.
6. I think James believes in justification by faith. It is after all a gift of God, but he believes just as strongly that we have our part to play and passive reception of God's grace is unacceptable. What God does and what we do, ought to go hand in hand, after all it is a new covenant, an agreement between two parties.  
I think justification by faith alone was the teaching of the early church and James is anxious to explain that it is a first step and it is up to us to move on from there, so that our faith can grow.
7. I think the reminder that demons believe in God puts a new slant on faith. It's quite masterly and certainly strengthens James opinion that we need some deeds to reflect our good intentions, obedience and genuine love.  
I wonder if demons fall into a category of their own: faith without justification.
8. God declared Abraham righteous when he took God at his word and believed he would become the father of many nations in Genesis 15:6. The episode with Isaac came many years later, Genesis 22, but Abraham was still faithfully following God's instructions confident that the word of God was

true. His faith was shown by his actions. Had he not acted he would have shown he did not have faith in God.

Abraham was naturally a popular example with the Jews as the first of the Patriarchs, the father of all, and therefore highly respected. He is referred to by Paul in Romans 4:1-3; 9:6-9 and the author of Hebrews in 11:17-19. So they must have felt this was a strong expression of faith.

There is also the association of ideas; God sacrificing his own son and Christ's faithfulness.

Rahab really did express her faith by her actions. Had she not acted her faith would have been dead along with the spies. James' point was well made.

Did those passages from Paul help you to decide what he felt about faith without any good deeds? I think he would have been quite stunned by the idea. Most of what he wrote was about how Christians should behave and what they should and shouldn't do. It never occurred to them they might just lie on their backs and think beautiful thoughts.

9. You probably realised I made a typo in this questions. Sorry about that. It should have been a comparison between James 3:17 and Galatians 5:22-23, not James 5:17. Hopefully you spotted that, especially as it was a comparison highlighted by Andrew in his talk on 1<sup>st</sup> July in the Wednesday Worship.

I love the similarity of Paul's thoughts on the fruit of the Spirit and James' on the wisdom that comes from heaven. I have the feeling this was something they never had the chance to discuss and yet their understanding was very much in tune at times.

Overall my conclusion is the James agrees with Paul that justification is by faith. However, that nasty little story in 2:14-17 is addressed to believers and shows exactly what faith without deeds looks like. So rather than disagreement with Paul, I see a clarification of how the two halves of faith come together: God's gift and our contribution as we work to try and make our own faith, '*mature and complete*'.

Here are two thoughts to take away:

Does James in fact enhance our understanding of faith and how to live faithful lives?

Was Luther in error himself to discount James' contribution?

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