

The Letter of James

A better Way of Living

Session Four: Faith and Works: Paul and James

Martin Luther called the letter of James 'a letter of straw' and relegated it to the appendix in his translation of the New Testament. His thesis, based on Paul's Letter to the Romans, was that justification is by faith alone. He said that James was in error by saying that "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." 2:17 and "...a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." 2:24

It might be helpful here to define justification.

Justification: God's declaration that someone is in the right, despite universal sin. The declaration will be made on the last day on the basis of an entire life (Roman's 2:1-16). However, Jesus dealt with sin through his death (Romans 3:21-4:25) so justification **may be brought forward by faith.**

Tom Wright's Paul for Everyman – Romans - glossary.

From what he wrote in Romans 10:9, Paul thought of faith as the specific belief that Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead.

So let's look at where we think James stands on justification, faith and good works (or deeds). Remember his letter is written to people with faith.

1. What does James say about the development of faith in 1:2-4?
2. Is faith a gift from God or something we have gained from our own efforts?
3. How does 1:22-24 relate to faith?
4. Do you see a connection with faith in 2:1-13?

In 2:14-26 we have the climax of James' teaching on faith and works (or deeds). He hammers home his argument that people must support their faith with actions or that faith becomes dead (v 17), useless (v 20), dead (v 26).

5. In 2:14 he asks can faith without deeds save a person, what does he mean by "save", if this person of faith is already justified by their faith? Or is this James saying that justification is not by faith?
6. In 2:24 he brings justified and faith together, but he does put the actions between them. Is he saying justification is by faith? Does it sound like an accepted understanding in the early church?
7. What do you think of 2:19? Is this comment about demons having faith helpful? Are demons justified?
8. How are the examples from scripture helpful to James' argument that faith without deeds is dead?

We are not studying Paul, but he did write in Galatians 2:1-10 that there was continuity between his teaching and that of the leaders in Jerusalem, so we should think about his opinion.

Romans 3:21-4:3 is a good place to start. He is addressing Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles and is very anxious to explain that justification is by faith without keeping the Jewish purity laws of diet, the Sabbath observances, circumcision and all the other things that divided Jews from Gentiles. He wants unity in the

church in Rome not the division, which he has seen in Asia Minor. Following the works of the Jewish law is one thing, now look at what he says about what else people do, both Jew and Gentile. Read Acts 26:20; Romans 6:15-18; Ephesians 2:8-10 and 4:17-32.

9. Compare James 5:17 with Galatians 5:22-23. What do you think?

James' letter is all about living the Christian life. That involves doing things. Much of what Paul writes about is exactly that and he doesn't separate faith from living and doing, he is just concerned that people do what is right; what God prepared them to do.

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