

SERMON: James 2:14-24
GOOD DEEDS / GOOD WORKS ARE NOT A WASTE OF TIME !

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith—but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works Show me your faith—without your works—and I will show you my faith by my works” You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

Have you ever thought, “What’s the big deal about striving so hard to keep God’s commandments? It’s all forgiven anyway.” Have you ever thought, “I know this is wrong, but a guy / a gal has to have a little excitement sometime. I’ll ask for forgiveness later, and all will be good.” --- In other words, “Doing good and right is optional before God. Keeping the commandments is a good idea, but not necessary. Good works are a waste of time.”

Such an idea comes from Satan! He twists the full forgiveness of God into a license to sin! “Go ahead, commit sin and transgress the will of God.” “Transgress” means to “step across” the forbidden line. “Transgress” and “trespass” are parallel words. “No Trespassing” means “Don’t walk here!” Transgressions and trespasses are sins. Satan sells you on the idea that it’s your right (it’s my body I’ll do with it what I want), that you deserve (I’ve earned some kind of enjoyment for all that I’ve done or been through). He sells you on the idea that God’s mercy and compassion will cover it all anyway—again and again and again—until finally you don’t care anymore. Sin makes one stupid. Do you remember how the Children of Israel left Egypt under God’s prophet Moses and were quick to murmur and find fault with God, and to think it was ok? When they were camped on the border of the promised land, they found fault (again), “We wish we would have died in Egypt!” God said to Moses, “Done! They have rebelled against Me ten times and I forgave them. They still will not listen. Done.” God did take them back, but stipulated that it would now take forty years in the wilderness to get there, until all the generation of “whiners” were dead (Numbers 14). Do not think you have a license to sin!

This carelessness about sin is what James was combatting in his letter. Loose, sloppy, careless “Christian” lives, self-centered, unloving, without pleasing God and without serving one another in love—all because “It’s not necessary. I’m saved by faith!” Bad idea. *What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith—but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?* James is saying, “Hold on! There’s a disconnect here!” He adds, *Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* ---- Is that right? I thought, “A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28)? We’ll come back to that passage.

James’ example: To walk past a brother or sister—be it from your family, from the family of faith, or someone else, especially someone you know—to see them in desperate need of food and clothes, but to shrug it off, wish them well, and walk away, thinking “Not my job,” is a deadly inconsistency with the mercy, love, and forgiveness, that you have from Christ, which you claim to know and cherish. Is there faith in such a heart? Such a “faith” is dead faith! A living shade tree produces leaves, a living fruit tree produces fruit, a living wheat plant produces kernels. That is its nature. Your nature as a redeemed child of God in Christ is to keep God’s will toward Him and toward others. A tree that has nothing to show is dead. To live without Christian good works, without keeping the commandment, denies the life you claim to have in the Savior.

Do you think good works are not necessary? James says, *Someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works [as if there are two alternate routes to heaven]. Then, Show me your faith—without your works—and I will show you my faith by my works.”* Faith cannot be seen. Without the deeds and the works that display the love for Jesus the Savior in the heart—He has loved you first—what proof is there that living faith is in your heart? Is it just a hollow, empty head knowledge? It’s like a man saying, “I believe in Go” and letting it go at that. “Sure, I believe

God exists, that He's real. But as far as His Son coming to be my Savior—I don't believe that I really need that. As far as acknowledging that He made me—who can prove that? As far as His being kind to me—I can show you a few hard things in my life that aren't so kind. As far as eternal death or eternal life—I think when you're dead, you're dead, and that's it. But sure, I believe in God.” What kind of faith in God would that be?! James describes it: *You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!* Even the evil spirits “believe” in God, believe that God exists, but they are scared to death of Him. Such belief is a dead belief. So also, *Do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?*

By this point perhaps you say, “Ok, I get it. Good works are part of a living faith. Let's agree.” However, James goes even further, and seems to go out of bounds!—which he does not—by saying, *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? ----- What?! Justified by works?! That is contradictory to Romas 3-4 where Paul says, A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Romans 3:28). If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace [a gift] but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (Romans 4:2-5).*

Are James and Paul butting heads, or what? They are not. The two writers, both under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are making very different points. Their difference does not have to do with two different meanings of the word “justified”—“declared not guilty.” The difference is in regard to the “works.” Paul is talking about “works” done to earn one's own salvation, without Christ, to earn self-credit and glory. Such works are clearly out! Paul says, even Abraham, when he looked up at the stars and God promised him that his offspring would be that numerous—his “offspring” being all believers in Christ—believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness!” (Genesis 15:6). Abraham was righteous by faith, not works. In no way, did Abraham's “work” of offering Isaac, merit him forgiveness. So for you. So for anyone in Christ.

James, on the other hand, is talking about good deeds and good works that come as a natural and automatic part of life in Christ. They are not optional, or without bearing. *Do you see that faith was working together with his works?* It was the fact that Abraham was forgiven by faith alone which led him even to the point of offering Isaac on the altar—at which point God stopped him. *By works faith was made perfect.* By his works, Abraham's faith was displayed to the utmost. God said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me” (Genesis 22:12). James is saying, See how Abraham's works provide the proof of his faith! Abraham was justified by works!! We are not quite so accustomed to hearing it put that way. *And so [by Abraham's works] the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” He was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.* Jesus speaks the same way in His parable of separating the sheep (believers) from the goats (unbelievers) at the end of time. His judgement is made on the basis and of what each has done (Matthew 25:31-46).

Thus both are true. Abraham, and you, and I are justified by faith alone in God's promised Savior. The clean slate He gives us is completely separate from our own efforts to do good.

But it is also true, that Abraham, and you, and I are justified by our works, which display our new life in the Savior—“Here is a believer in Christ.”

In both cases, faith in Christ that is of the essence!

What are the good works James in His letter encourages us to do, as ones washed clean in Jesus? Here are some. Suffer trials patiently, pray to the Lord in confidence not doubt, be humble before one another, with God's help stand strong against temptation, know that God's gifts are always perfect, be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, bridle your tongue, visit orphans and widows, show no favoritism especially to the rich, show mercy, be peaceful, willing to yield, live without hypocrisy, do not love pleasure, do not love money, do not grumble, do not misuse God's name, pray for the sick, confess your faults to one another, strive to turn back the one who errs.

Are such good works necessary? They do not merit forgiveness. Faith in Jesus does that. But good works are a natural display of faith in Christ in the heart. Good works are necessary. Without them faith is dead.

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---