

Pr Mark Turner: Justification by Works?

The Gospel According to James (9/11/19)

Scripture Reading: James 2:14-26

Review:

In the first part of this two part series we focussed on what Paul says about justification in Romans. Today we will be looking primarily at what James says about it.

Introduction:

Paul's conclusion is that a man is justified (made right with God) by faith - apart from the deeds of the law (see Romans 3:28).

The case study that Paul used to form this conclusion was Abraham. He is the ultimate example for the Apostle Paul's theology of justification (see Romans 4:4,5).

James' conclusion, on the other hand, is that a man is justified (made right with God) by works, and not by faith alone.

Like the Apostle Paul, James uses Abraham as his case study. The same case study was used, but a different conclusion was reached. How are we going to deal with that?

What was the Author's Intent?

The first step to properly understanding/interpreting the Bible is to seek understanding of the intention of the communication of the author. In other words, before we can properly apply the text, we must first understand it.

In this case, we have two author's saying things that appear contradictory. We can either throw our hands in the air in despair, or we can seek to understand what it was that each author was intending to communicate. Then, once a conclusion has been reached, we can compare these interpretations to form a conclusion as to whether they are contradictory, or complementary.

Justification:

Justification, we decided last time, is a legal term that means being right with God - in the context of the judgment.

Two examples of this use of the term are:

- Deuteronomy 25:1
- Romans 2:13

Paul began his epistle to the church in Rome by establishing the fact that everyone stands condemned. The theological term for this is universal condemnation. It doesn't matter, he says, if you are a Jew or a Gentile, all stand condemned (see Romans 1:18-3:20).

He then establishes that no one is going to get right with God by "the deeds of the law" (see Romans 3:20).

- It became the traditional Protestant view that Paul means that 'good works performed don't produce justification.' Largely as a result of the way that Martin Luther read and understood the book of Romans.
- More recently, the popular Protestant understanding of Paul's use of this term has been updated. It is now believed that he meant that 'what the law required of Israel, as God's people, does not produce justification.'

Paul then goes on to say that Justification has been made possible for all people through the manifestation of the faithfulness of God in Jesus. Faithfulness that led to Him giving Himself for us (see Romans 3:21,22).

Faith:

Continuing to let the author's define their terms, let's see how the Apostle Paul uses the term 'faith.'

To Paul, faith is complete trust and confidence in God. So the question he seems to be asking throughout his letter to the Romans is 'where is your confidence?' Is your confidence in circumcision? Or in Christ?

Abraham, Paul says, was counted righteous because he had complete confidence in God (see Romans 4:4,5).

What about James?

So that is the Apostle Paul, but what about James? Viewed by Martin Luther as an 'epistle of straw,' it does seem without further reflection, that James' view contradicts Paul's.

"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" **James 2:14**

What kind of works is James talking about?

If we were to take the conclusions of the Apostle Paul and apply them to passages in the book of James, we could come to some pretty dodgy conclusions. That is because James defines his terms differently to Paul.

James defines his terms by saying that 'works' are works of compassion (see James 2:15,16). Faith, he says, without this kind of work, is useless! (see James 2:17).

What then is faith James? To James, faith is defined as 'empty words' without follow through (see James 2:19).

In Deuteronomy, from which James seems to be drawing his definitions, it says that demons know there is one God, but they don't love Him (see Deuteronomy 6:4,5).

Justification by Works:

Works:

- Paul - Works of the law (negative).
- James - Works of mercy (positive).

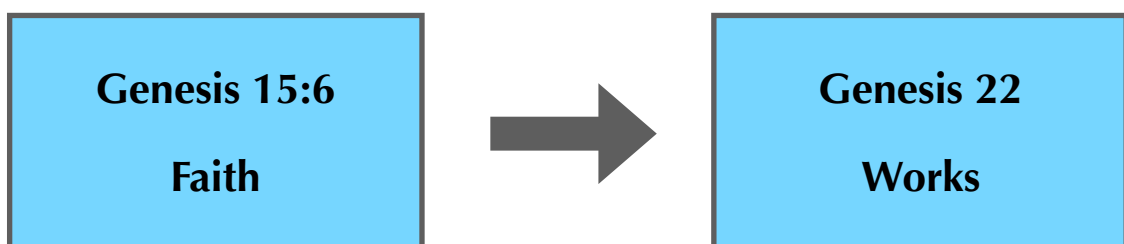
Faith:

- Paul - A Confident trust in God (positive).
- James - Mere mental assent (negative).

Paul and James use different definitions of terms because they are speaking to different audiences. They, when you make a comparison, are also focussing on different aspects of Justification.

- Justification to Paul = the beginning of the Christian life (being accepted).
- Justification to James = the ongoing course of the Christian life (living acceptably).

How do we know this? Because they both used Abraham as their case study, but each quoted from a different part of Abraham's story (James 2:21).



The faith of Genesis 15 is tested in Genesis 22.

Abraham's works then, according to James, were evidence that his faith was genuine.

Illustration:

Charles Blondin as he was referred to on stage (officially Jean François Gravelet), a French acrobat and tightrope walker. Blondin toured the USA in the 1800's and became famous for walking across the Niagara falls on a tightrope.

Blondin was so good at this that he not only walked across the falls, but performed tricks on the rope - even carrying a cooker on his back and cooking and eating breakfast on the tightrope.

One day Blondin asked his onlooking audience if they believed that he could carry someone across the rope on his back. The crowd immediately cheered, saying they believed he could do it. Upon hearing their confidence, Blondin asked them a second question. Who would be willing to come across on my back? There was now a deathly stillness and silence among the crowd.

They all believed he could do it, but none of them were willing to demonstrate their confidence by clinging to his back.

Until someone broke the silence, saying that he was willing to go. That man was Harry Colcord, Blondin's manager. Of all people in the world, Harry knew Blondin better than anyone. It was because Harry knew Blondin so well that he was able to demonstrate his unshakable confidence in his ability by going across the falls on his back.

Conclusion:

Saving, Biblical faith involves both intellectual acceptance of truth and its resultant action.