



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Real Faith

Thoughts from Paul and James

David Anguish

### *Introduction*

1. We'll begin with a Bible-recognition exercise. Which Bible author wrote the following?

They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work (Tit. 1:16).

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (Rom. 2:13).

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead (Jas. 2:26).

2. If you said Paul for the first two and James for the third, you're right. But, it's understandable if you missed them, especially the first two.
  - a. The verses from James and Paul which are commonly compared, with the tension much discussed, are these:
    - a. "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24).
    - b. "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28).
  - b. Traditionally, more attention has been given to Paul, especially as we have become more concerned (rightly so) to stress his point that we are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9; see Rom. 11:6), not by what we do ("works"). That has often resulted in the James text being passed over or understood to make a point it is not making.
  - c. Therefore, Paul's use of James-like language about works comes as a surprise to many.
3. Because of the issue's prominence and its place at the heart of Christian teaching, we should carefully study what Paul and James are saying, but not at the expense of other important issues.
  - a. Some misuse James 2:24 to make a point about the first principles of obeying the gospel (a phrase used by Paul [Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8] and Peter [1 Pet. 4:17], not James).
  - b. We can find satisfaction in winning a debate about a point of theology, but fail to apply an important point made by both James and Paul: correct teaching about our beliefs is not the sum total of complete faith.
4. After briefly considering a direction for resolving the tension between Romans 3:28 and James 2:24, we will consider the more important matter of what Paul and James teach about real faith.

*Body*

## I. Clarifying James versus Paul.

- A. The conflict between Romans and James that has stirred such debate in churches in the West was virtually non-existent in the East.<sup>1</sup>
  - 1. Commentaries by Origen and Cyril (3rd / 4th cent.) used James 2 to explain Romans 3-4.
  - 2. A thousand years before Luther, “Severus [ca. 465-538] concludes that Paul agrees with James, citing Gal 5:6, ‘Faith working through love’” (Johnson, 135).
- B. The apparent tension is resolved when we understand that James and Paul have different concerns.
  - 1. They use two key words in different ways.
    - a) *Justify* — Paul focused on being acquitted from guilt; James used it in the sense of vindicating the truth of a claim that has been made (i.e., “I really have faith”).
    - b) *Works* — in the key texts (Rom. 3-4; Gal. 2), Paul is talking about relying on a certain kind of works (“of the law”) as a substitute for the saving work of Jesus; James is talking about the works of true faith that produce obedience.<sup>2</sup>
  - 2. The writers in the East had it right: “Paul was understood to be talking about the faith that led to baptism, and James about the faith of the baptized” (Johnson, 134).
  - 3. In fact, “no contradiction actually exists” (McCartney, 272).

## II. Learning About Works from Paul.

- A. Beyond sometimes using “works” the same way James did (see Rom. 2:13; Gal. 5:6; Tit. 1:16), Paul was concerned to emphasize obedience.
  - 1. In Romans, Paul used one of the words for obedience (ὕπακοή, *hypakoē*)<sup>3</sup> 11 times.
    - a) Statements that in effect present a thematic frame for the epistle talk about his mission in terms of bringing the Gentiles to obedient faith (Rom. 1:5; 15:18; see 16:26).
    - b) Jesus’ atoning work was an act of obedience (5:19).
    - c) Those with new life were to be like obedient slaves (6:12, 16).
    - d) The difference between salvation recipients and Jews who had not accepted the good news was whether or not they had obeyed from the heart (6:17; 10:16).
    - e) He ends by commending their “obedience known to all” (16:19).
  - 2. “Paul, as much as James, is concerned that Christ be obeyed, not simply acknowledged (Rom. 2:8; 6:16; 2 Cor. 10:5), and that Christian faith be lived, not just claimed” (McCartney, 276).
- B. We’ll return to James to see the components of real faith.

<sup>1</sup> See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 37A, 134-135.

<sup>2</sup> See Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 274.

<sup>3</sup> Paul used these words 22 times in all. He also used synonyms: παρακαλή (*parakaleō*) — Rom. 5:19; πείθω / ἀπειθέω (*peithō/apeitheō*) — 2:8; 10:21; 11:30-31; 15:31; πράσσω (*prassō*, to do or practice) — 1:32; 2:1-3, 25; 7:15, 9:11; 13:4.

### III. Learning About Real Faith from James.

#### A. Real faith begins with *knowledge* of God.

1. James 2:14-26 assumes this foundational truth.
  - a) He does say that the confession that “God is one” (see Deut. 6:4) is a good thing (v. 19); his concern is that some thought it was enough.
  - b) He also reminds us that “Abraham believed God” (v. 23), citing a statement (Gen. 15:6) made about Abraham years before he sacrificed Isaac.
2. I think of a Christian woman I knew who was experiencing a personal crisis complicated by the understanding that God had let her down. But, it was her expectations of God and his promises that were faulty.
3. From Genesis 15 to 22, Abraham learned some things about God and his friendship with him (v. 23) that led to complete trust when told to sacrifice Isaac.

#### B. Real faith possesses *confidence* in God.

1. Michael Green tells a story about a girl who told a friend she had ten pennies. The other girl looked in her hand, saw only five, and said, “You only have five pennies.” The first girl replied, “I have five now, and my father told me he would give me five more tonight. So, I have ten.” Her father’s character made the promised deed as good as done.<sup>4</sup>
2. James knew that all we need to understand why Abraham “offered up his son Isaac on the altar” (a statement of fact; v. 21) is to remember that he “believed God” (23).
3. This is where his prior knowledge of God came in, as Hebrews 11:17-19 shows.<sup>5</sup>
4. James assumes this attitude of trusting confidence in other texts where he speaks of faith (1:3, 6; 5:15), as well as in his encouragement to withstand oppression by remembering that the Lord is coming (5:7-11).

#### C. Real faith is *active* for God.

1. Both Abraham and Rahab (vv. 21-25) went beyond profession and trust.
2. This concern is also seen in (though not confined to) James’s other uses of “faith.”
  - a) Do we take God at his word and “count it all joy” when facing trials (1:2-3)?
  - b) Do we seek wisdom without wavering (1:5-7)?
  - c) Do we act on the word in line with our faith in “the Lord of glory” (2:1) with respect to other people, especially those most in need (1:22, 27; 2:5)?
  - d) Does our moral life reflect what we have heard the word say (1:26)?
3. James challenges the popular idea that accepting the truth of certain doctrines, going to church, publicly responding to the invitation, etc., amount to real faith. Our activity in the life *and* mission of God’s people tells the real story.
4. “In a day when people often confuse justification by faith with justification by *profession* of faith, we do well to hear James’s concern” (McCartney, 279).

---

<sup>4</sup> Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, rev. ed., 172.

<sup>5</sup> An important episode is in Genesis 18:22-33 where Abraham raised his questions about the destruction of Sodom. See especially v. 25 where he exclaimed, “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

*Conclusion*

1. An old story tells of a man who fell over the edge of a cliff and was clinging desperately to a scraggly tree on its side. Calling desperately for God to help him, he was rewarded with a direct answer. He said he wanted to be rescued and responded to God's question about the matter by saying he really did believe in him. "Do you really believe?" God asked again. "Yes, yes, I believe!" the man exclaimed. And God said, "Then, let go." After a pause, the man asked, "Is anyone else up there?"
2. We say we know about God. That's a good start. We feel we trust God. That's progress. But have we let go? That's real faith. If you've been putting off responding to him, why not "let go" and come to Jesus?

*June 5, 2011; updated June 30, 2016*  
*[www.davidanguish.com](http://www.davidanguish.com)*