



FEED MY SHEEP

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Justification: Reconciling Paul and James

Briefly reviewing from last month... It appears from a casual reading of Paul's writings in Romans and Galatians compared with the epistle of James that the two inspired writers are diametrically opposed. Paul clearly states that justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*¹), while James appears to make good works part and parcel of saving faith. In the previous issue, we began to demonstrate that there is no real contradiction. The two saints are speaking of two kinds of faith, or we could say—two aspects of *the* faith. Whereas Paul was focused primarily upon the entrance into the life of faith by means of justifying grace, James' focus was more on those who claimed to have already been justified by grace. James was condemning false faith, lip service faith. Talk is cheap. "Show me by your works" was James' demand. Continuing our studies now...

Justified in whose sight?

A second point of comparison and harmonization of Paul and James' discussions of faith and works is this: Paul is teaching about being justified before God. James is teaching about being justified before men. Paul stresses repeatedly that before God we are justified by our faith alone. Works have absolutely nothing to do with it. Consider:

Romans 3: 19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin

And also:

Romans 4: 2 For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath *whereof* to glory; but not before God.

So Paul is clearly dealing with our righteousness (justification) before God. And it is by faith alone that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us (not infused into us). James, on the other hand, was addressing a problem he saw among the brethren, the problem of cheap talk and phony faith. We saw last issue how James was rebuking those who claimed to be believers, but one could not tell the difference between them and the pagans. Why not? ...because their lives showed no fruit! Paul spoke of being justified before YHWH. James is saying: "You claim to be justified before God because of your faith. Then justify yourself before me and the brethren by showing some fruit in your life. Show us the proof by your works!

James 2: 18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works.

Paul does not disagree.

Titus 3:8 *This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men. ...*

14 And let ours also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful.

Notice that Paul is careful to use a past tense in verse 8—they already "have believed"—and the fruits of good works follow faith. It's a very simple test. Jesus had stated the same thing: "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). James applies it to all who claim faith in Christ: if your faith yields no fruit, it is no faith at all, it is a counterfeit and phony faith. James uses Abraham as a case-in-point:

James 2: 20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

... 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

In verse 21 James appears to be stating that Abraham was not justified until he had performed the “works” of offering up Isaac upon the altar. Notice in verse 23 that James is quoting the very same scripture (Gen. 15:6), which Paul quotes in Romans 4:3. There are two periods of Abraham’s life in view here as we compare Paul and James: (1) the era before Ishmael and Isaac were even born when God promised great numbers of offspring (among other things) to Abram, and Abram believed; and (2) many years later when both Ishmael and Isaac were probably grown men.²

We will not take the space here to reproduce all of Romans, chapter 4, but we strongly encourage the reader to read it now. In this chapter Paul is clearly speaking of the early period in Abram/Abraham’s life where Abraham was imputed as righteous before God, long before Isaac was even born. In view of our recent studies concerning the Laver at the Tabernacle³ and its connection with baptism and circumcision, it is important to note that Abraham was justified *before* he was circumcised.

Romans 4: 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:

So then why does James say (in James 2:21 above) that it was many years after Abraham’s justification (of Genesis 15:6) that Abraham was justified by works when he offered up Isaac? As the half-brother of the Lord, and a pillar in the church, James was certainly well-acquainted with the Holy Scriptures. He knew that Abraham was justified long before Isaac was ever born. What James obviously has in mind, therefore, is that Abraham’s obedience in offering Isaac was the outworking of his faith; it was the fruit, the works, which shows *to us* and to everyone else, that his faith was real. It wasn’t cheap talk.

God Almighty knew his faith was genuine at the

beginning, and so Abraham was justified *before* God before Isaac was even born. But Abraham was justified *before men* by his demonstration of obedience in offering Isaac. It takes real, genuine faith to obey God in all things! We, too, shall have our faith tested from time to time. This brings forth fruit, but it is not this fruit (works of obedience) which is the cause for our justification. Paul says:

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is the gift of God:*

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast

Paul emphasized the sovereignty of God in our salvation. It is by His pure grace; His free gift. It has nothing to do with our performing any works of the law (or any works, period). Paul attacks legalism and boasting. James attacks license and lethargy. Paul throws the life preserver of the cross to the sinking sinner. He demolishes both the sinner’s pride and his despair—the pride of boasting, that I am good enough in my works (law-keeping, legalism) so that I have earned salvation. No way, never—declares Paul.

And for the despairing sinner (like Luther, and you and me at one time, perhaps?) that I will never be able to measure up and qualify for salvation. Nonsense, says Paul, your focus is on the wrong person. Quit your self-centered efforts to merit salvation and get your eyes upon the perfection that is in Christ Jesus. He did what you cannot do and his righteousness is imputed to you! Paul is dealing with entrance into faith and salvation, how to come to faith in Christ.

James attacks the opposite extremes. His focus is not on those just now hearing the gospel of how to be justified before God. Rather, he takes aim at those who claim to have been in the Way of faith for some time. He demolishes their arrogance and presumption, their licence and lethargy. He scolds them for presuming they can claim to be believers and then lead lives devoid of good works, the fruit of faith. He warns them against their apathy. He exhorts them to show their faith by their works.

Consequently, there is no real conflict or contradiction between James and Paul. Between them, the Bible is whole—unified, not divided. Doctrines are in balance. Paul’s expositions assist the sinner over the gulf of the Law by the cross of Christ. James’ expositions counter the idea of cheap grace.

Cheap Grace

In withstanding the heresies of Romanism regarding works, many churches of the Protestant Reformation let the pendulum swing too far the other way and were ensnared in the heresy of cheap grace. This is even more

prevalent today, being found not only in mainline Protestant denominations, but in evangelical, fundamental and charismatic groups as well. What is cheap grace? It takes several forms, depending on the denomination or group. It is evident in those who are taught to believe that simply making an affirmation of faith is a passport to heaven, or for others, that being baptized is the ticket. Still others are taught that just being born into a covenant community (i.e., “church” organization) results in salvation. Regardless of the specific brand of cheap grace, they are all characterized by the idea of *instant* salvation.

Salvation became equated with justification alone. Their overemphasis on the marvelous gift of God’s grace through the merits of Christ caused them to de-emphasize and then ignore and finally to lose sight of the necessity for a life of committed discipleship to Jesus as Lord, not just to Jesus as Savior of our lives. This committal to discipleship for life is the process of sanctification, the second stage of salvation, about which we shall have much more to say in future issues of FMS.

God the Great Initiator

Another area of great importance to be stressed in relation to justification by faith is the sovereignty of God. As noted above, Paul emphasizes God’s sovereignty in our justification. What we mean by the sovereignty of God in relation to faith and justification, is that all of it is God’s doing. In fact, His sovereignty applies to all three phases of our salvation: justification, sanctification and glorification. It is God, who through Christ and His Holy Spirit, is responsible for our salvation from beginning to end. The part that we play is strictly and always in response to what God initiates in us. Paul states that before we were saved (referring to justification), we were spiritually dead.

Ephesians 2:1 And you *hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;*

Query: How can someone who is dead do anything? A spiritual “corpse” has no power to do anything, unless first acted upon by something/Someone else. Thus, when a person “comes to Christ” by faith, it is only because God has first “quickened” him; i.e., made him alive in order that he will respond. Theologically, this initiatory grace which must precede all else is termed “prevenient grace.” It awakens the dead sinner and enables him to respond.

So, how can someone who is spiritually dead make a decision to follow Jesus? Aside from prevenient grace, he cannot. Then, even when he does decide to follow the Lord, that decision is because of faith. And that decision and act of believing is not at our own initiative either. Our act of believing is a response to God’s gift of faith to us. We would not believe, period—all the “free will” in the

world notwithstanding—unless God had *first* given us that gift of faith. (Ephesians 2:8)

All that we have we owe to the Almighty. It is His grace that awakens us, His grace through His Holy Spirit which moves our spirit. Our own spirit in turn motivates our soul to respond to the offer of salvation by faith. This is our part of the “work” of faith, as referred to in John 6: 28 & 29:

28 Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?

29 Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.

The work of the soul in faith

Let us now examine further this wondrous gift of faith. The classical and correct understanding of saving faith includes the three complementary elements of assent, trust and decision. Or paraphrasing Augustine using different terminology: every act of sincere faith wells up from the whole person as knowing, feeling, and willing. These deal with the response of our soul to God’s grace and gift of faith. The soul realm is that which concerns the personality. It is not to be confused with our spirit.⁴ The soul’s domain is the mind, will and emotions. These correspond and respond to the three elements of faith.

Assent is the belief of the mind, fully persuaded by the evidence of God’s self-revelation in His Word. It is an intellectual knowing. Faith is defined in these terms in the epistle to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Although the objective of our faith (eternal life) is not yet seen (i.e., a present reality); nevertheless, faith is not a gullible and reckless assent without evidence. The gift of faith causes a person to believe the Scriptures and the eyewitness testimony of the men recorded therein. Reason, the faculty of the intellect, is not excluded from faith. We are to study the evidence and make a rational judgment on its reliability. However, intellectual assent is not sufficient; the heart, the emotions of the sinner must be involved as well.

Trust involves the emotions, the heart of man. “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness [justification]...” (Romans 10:10a) Trust suggests the element of risk in true faith. No one put it better than Job when he avowed: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him...” (Job 13:15). Saving faith puts trust in a person, Jesus Christ, not in an assortment of facts about Him. It is easy to have faith in and trust an assortment of facts, empirical evidence. But to put trust in a person, that he can and will do

what he promises is another matter. All of us have had our trust in another person betrayed or let down at one time or another. In saving faith, trust is that element whereby we make a heart-surrendering leap upon the promised mercies of God. It is like a child's leap from a tree branch into the arms of a loving father. The child has full confidence and trust that when he jumps, he will land safely in his father's arms. Paul's prayer was that each believer "be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith..." (Ephesians 3:16, 17a).

The trust of faith presupposes the assent of faith. In other words, one does not and should not blindly put trust in anyone without having first weighed the testimony concerning the person's trustworthiness. With God's record of self-disclosure in the Scriptures, we of faith are readily persuaded of its veracity. Others are not. Why the difference? It is only because of grace. Some have been given to see (understand) and believe; others have not been given the gift. This is clearly taught by our Lord.

Matthew 13:10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?

11 He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

Clearly, it is the sovereign choosing of God. Do you believe in Jesus Christ for your salvation? Then you and I have no cause to boast, for it was a gift given you by the Father. Let us thank and praise Him!

The third element in saving faith is the decision, an act of the will, a function of our soul. As before, let us not pride ourselves to think that this decision of our will is any of our doing, or anything to boast about. Again, it is all the Lord's doing. For we are instructed in Philippians 2, verse 13 that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Our volitional act, our decision to follow Jesus is wonderful and proper, but let us not exalt ourselves as though it were of our own initiative and doing. Our "work," such as it is, is a response to God's grace. "It is God that justifieth." (Rom. 8:33b)

Saving faith therefore comprises a complete and total surrender of the soul. All three aspects and functions of the soul must be involved. Minus any one or two of the three elements makes an incomplete faith. The mind (knowing facts about Him) is involved; the emotions (heart trusting in His mercy) is involved, and the will (conscious decision to follow Him) is involved.

The end of enmity

In conclusion, there is another effect of justification which should not go unmentioned: peace and joy. Man in

his sinful condition is always at enmity with God. Our conscience cannot rest; we are in inner turmoil and conflict. This dreadful condition can only be cured by one thing: accepting by grace through faith God's offer of justification. We do not have to earn it; it is a free pardon. When we accept it by faith (assent, trust and decision), we then experience and feel that peace that surpasses all understanding and we have joy in it.

Romans 5:1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

In these two verses, Paul describes both the first and the third and final stage of our salvation. The first step is justification. We then have peace with God. We are reconciled to Him. Our conscience is at rest. Because of that, we have joy. We recognize that the ultimate result of our justification will be "the glory of God," the glorification of our body in the resurrection unto unending and sinless life. Praise Him for His bountiful mercy!

Endnotes

1. Pronounced *so'-lah fee'-day*.

2. The Book of Jasher suggests that Isaac was about 38 years old when he willingly laid down on the altar.

3. We are now 22 tapes into our detailed study of The Tabernacle in the Wilderness... with still more to come. The ten tapes on the Laver, Baptism and Circumcision are available as a separate album for a donation of \$33 ppd.

A list of all our individual taped studies is available. To join the tape ministry and receive new tapes monthly, just request to be put on the tape ministry. (Some support for the tapes is expected from those receiving them; but new listeners may sample them *gratis* for a three-month trial period.)

4. It may be many months before we commence a detailed discussion of soul and spirit in the FMS. We have expounded extensively on this topic in a four-part tape series entitled *The Truth about Hell, Soul and Spirit*. (\$18 ppd.). Or these four are part of the 10-tape album, A-103, *It's Hell...or Nothing!* (\$33 ppd.) A complete list of all our tapes and literature will be sent upon request.

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