

11.21.10 / James 2:20-26

Passage Insight

To recap briefly from last week's passage, let's address the seeming contradiction between the words of James and Paul regarding justification. Paul comments in Romans that justification is by faith alone and not by works, while James says that faith without works is dead. The difference in their words comes down to vantage point, where Paul is saying that performing works of the law will never earn God's justification, and James is saying that once we are saved by faith, the natural result will be works that are evidence of that saving faith. Paul is making the point that someone can enter the kingdom of God only by faith, and James makes it clear that this saving faith will naturally produce works in the lives of those who have been granted access into the kingdom of God.

In this passage, we are reminded of what we see in Genesis, where Abraham is credited righteousness. This righteousness was not granted to Abraham as a result of his actions, but rather because he believed the covenant, because he believed in God. His works were simply evidence, proof-positive of this belief. In other words, God's salvation didn't come to Abraham because he obeyed God's difficult command, but rather his obedience showed that he had already been saved by God through faith. We see in this that we are only afforded righteousness when we believe in God (not by any action of our own) and that faith is only saving faith when it is active faith.

Regarding being called a friend of God, Abraham is not the only one who gets this treasured title. All of us who have been saved by Christ in fact are called God's friends. In John 15:12-14, Jesus says this:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Abraham was considered a friend of God due to his belief in Him, and Jesus tells us here that the those who are His friends do what He commands, in other words, the natural response to faith in Jesus is to take action. Faith in Christ exhibits works.

It is through no action of our own that we are allowed to become friends of God. God chose Abraham, God made the covenant, God made the promises to Abraham, God made Abraham into a great nation as promised, God sent His Son to save us . . . we can take no credit for this friendship with God, as He is the one who instigated the plan to restore us to Himself.

Titus 1:16 says this of those who are "unbelieving" of God: "They profess that they know God, but in works they deny Him." This signifies a dead faith, one without corresponding works. James tells us in verse 26 that faith without works corresponds to a body without spirit, or breath. How can you tell if somebody is alive? You look for signs of life: breathing, organ function, ability to communicate, bloodflow, etc. If these things aren't there, you can deduce that the person is dead. Similarly, how can you tell if somebody's faith is alive? You look for signs of the faithful life, for actions being taken that are motivated by and that rely upon the promises of God.

We should note what James is NOT saying here as well. He is not saying that a broken faith can be repaired with adequate works. Faith without works is a dead faith, and it cannot be revived by anything. It is dead by nature, and is not really faith at all. Genuine faith, however, that does produce works, can indeed be matured by those works. It starts with a small leap of faith and then grows as we see more and more evidence of God's faithfulness. That's what this is really about, right? Becoming more and more aware of what is already true about our Lord? As we take more and more action motivated and relying on our faith in God, we become more and more aware of who He is, the

faithful Father who never changes. We change as our faith matures, and we simply become more aware of what was already true all along. Remarkably, as this happens, we are made more and more like the source of our faith Himself. What a gift!

This faith is for all types. Consider the contrast of Abraham and Rahab in this passage. Abraham was of God's chosen people, Rahab a foreigner – Abraham was respected, Rahab considered disreputable – Abraham was a man, Rahab a woman. Despite tremendous differences in lineage, lifestyle, and gender, in the end they are both considered righteous. Why? Because of their belief the Lord. The Lord is not concerned with worldly status or affections, but rather the affections of a heart inclined toward Him.

Application Questions

Friendship With God

- 1) Where do you take credit for your friendship with God?
- 2) Where do you think something you are or something you've done has led God to choose you?
- 3) What is wrong with this?

Actions As Evidence

- 1) What are some specific actions that evidence someone's faith in God?
- 2) When was the last time you took action that required you to have faith in God?
- 3) Why would faith in anything less than God have fallen short?
- 4) How can you nurture this faith-based action-taking in the future?

Maturing In Our Faith

- 1) When we have faith in God, we are having faith in all that He is, including His own steadfastness and faithfulness. Where do you struggle to see God's steadfastness and faithfulness?
- 2) What actions does this lack of faith lead to?
- 3) Who or what are you having faith in when you take such action?
- 4) On the flipside, how has your faith matured as you've taken action that requires faith in God?
- 5) How has this made you more aware of God's unchanging nature as you mature in the faith?

Faith For All Types

- 1) If faith in God is for all types, regardless of lineage, lifestyle, gender, or other considerations, how might this change the way you reach out to others in our city?
- 2) Because of this truth, who will you reach out to that you haven't reached out to before?
- 3) What does this look like?
- 4) When will you begin?

Sources

- Prayer
- Bible Speaks Today
- Word Bible Commentary
- Tyndale
- Bible Exposition Commentary