

Four Aspects of Our Justification
James 2:14-26
Outline by Phillip Kayser

- Intro: Many have claimed that there is a blatant contradiction between Paul and James. When Scriptures are taken out of context, it may appear so. For example:
- Paul says, "...God imputes righteousness *apart from works...*" (Rom. 4:6); and "we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and *not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.*" (Gal. 2:16)
- James says, "Was not Abraham our father *justified by works* when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?" (2:21) "You see that a man is *justified by works...*" (2:24) "Was not Rahab the harlot also *justified by works...*?" (2:25)
- I. However, James makes clear that there is more than one kind of justification:
- A. The word "only" in verse 24 is an adverb, not an adjective (as many English readers mistake it to be). It modifies "justified" rather than "faith." He is distinguishing between a by-faith justification and a by-works justification. By using the word only to modify "justified" he is saying that justification by faith is not the only kind of justification a believer has.
- B. He uses Abraham to illustrate both types of justification: verse 23 shows a legal¹ justification by belief alone for pagan, uncircumcised Abraham. Verses 21-22 show a non-legal justification that occurred 40 years later for Abraham the saint. The second justification is the main point of James' discourse: that saving faith shows itself through works, and that a person who has truly had Christ's righteousness imputed to him (v. 23) will also have Christ's righteousness imparted to him in a way demonstrable to all. (See the numerous references to demonstration below.)
- II. In making this distinction, he is simply affirming well-known distinctions found in the Old Testament.² Scripture speaks of four aspects of justification, and all four aspects are always present wherever true salvation has come in an individual's life:
- A. There are three aspects of justification that are purely judicial (they occur in the court room before a judge).
1. We are justified JUDICIALLY by God alone (Rom. 3:26,30; 8:30,33). This is a legal declaration that was made by God as Judge once and for all that we are: 1) legally not guilty and 2) we are legally righteous.
 2. We are justified MERITORIOUSLY by Christ alone (Is. 53:11; Rom. 3:24; 4:23,25; 5:8,9; 10:4). This is the legal ground (basis) for that declaration of God. Since God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5), the ungodly sinner who comes for mercy has no righteousness of his own. Instead, the righteousness of Christ must be imputed to him. When faith unites us to Christ, our sins were imputed to Jesus (who suffered in our place) and His righteousness is imputed to us. There can be no justification apart from the perfect works of Christ.
 3. We are justified MEDIATELY by faith alone (Rom. 3:26,30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16, 3:24). Faith is the legal channel or means by which that righteousness is claimed or received. Unless we appeal to the court for justification, we are not justified. But in the court room we must by faith appeal to Christ's works, not our own. The moment our own works are brought into the court room, a guilty verdict must come against us. In the court room, faith alone can shine, because faith alone appropriates Christ's merits.
- B. There is one aspect of justification that takes place when one leaves the court room.
4. We are justified EVIDENTIALLY by works alone (James 2:21-25; 1 Jn. 2:4,15,19, 3:6-10,24; 4:8,20). Works is the visible demonstration that we have a saving faith and that the court has indeed vindicated us. Since faith is an inner quality that cannot be seen, faith cannot demonstrate anything. Works are the only demonstration that others can see that we are justified Christians. (See Christ's statement: "by their fruits you will know them.") If there are no works, it is evident that there was no faith, and thus that there was no judicial declaration that we are acquitted. As the Reformers worded it, "We are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone."
- III. Though James (like Paul) acknowledges other aspects to justification, his emphasis is on "evidential justification" (sometimes called "demonstrative justification") by which saved people can demonstrate or evidence their living and saving faith.
- A. He is talking to people in the church ("my brethren" - 1:2; 2:1,14; "my beloved brethren" - 1:16,19; 2:5) who are already professing believers (1:3,12,18; 2:1) but who are living inconsistently with their profession (2:1-13)
- B. He is talking about claims to faith ("hold the faith... says he has faith... says... will say...")
- C. He is talking about demonstrating faith, and demonstrating a justified status ("shown... show... speak... do...shown...show me... I will show you")
- D. Notice the contrast between two aspects of justification in Abraham's life:
1. In verse 21 James alludes to a justification that took place in Genesis 22. There God said "because you have done this... because you have obeyed My voice" (v. 16,18). Abraham's works were necessary to demonstrate to his son, to the angel of the Lord, and (by revelation) to the whole world, that He was indeed a man of saving faith. It was an evidential justification.
 2. In verse 23 James clarifies that this justification by works is not to be confused with the justification by faith alone

¹ The Greek for "accounted" is λογίζομαι which is a legal or forensic term related to justification by faith in Paul's writings.

² See for example, John Murray, "Justification," in *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. I, pp. 336-362. Murray shows how the Hebrew verb for justified has "a variety of significations" including, "Stative... Causative... Demonstrative... [and] Forensic." His essay gives the Scriptural examples for each.

in Genesis 15:6. James treats the Genesis 15 incident exactly as Paul will – as a legal declaration that Abraham was righteous by faith alone.

- a) The Greek word for “accounted” or “credited” (margin) is λογίζομαι which means “imputed.” It was not a righteousness that Abraham had in himself. It was an alien righteousness which was imputed to Him.
 - b) There were no witnesses to “show” his faith to. This was simply a declaration of God from His court room as to His acceptance of Abraham as a saved man.
 - c) From that moment on He became the friend of God. He didn’t earn this friendship. It was given to him.
 - d) All of this James says came because “Abraham believed God.”
 - e) James says that Genesis 22 “fulfilled” the truth of a justification that occurred 40 years before (Gen 15). The profession of Genesis 15 was being lived out in Genesis 22. Genesis 22 was a test of a faith that Abraham had for the past 40 years. His faith and His justified state were demonstrated by works.
- E. James is seeking to show that a genuinely saving faith is a faith that is not alone; it is a faith that works.
1. Verse 14 – “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that (hJ) faith save him?”
 2. Verses 15-16 – words are empty without action.
 3. Verse 17 – faith by itself is a dead faith.
 4. Verse 18 – to those who claim that faith and works can be separated, James insists that it is impossible to show faith apart from works, and secondly, that works demonstrate the presence of faith.
 5. Verse 19 - Mere doctrinal belief is not saving faith, since demons have good doctrine but no salvation.
 6. Verse 20 – faith without works is a dead faith.
 7. Verses 21-23 – Proof of what has been said can be seen in that Abraham demonstrated the saving faith that he started his Christian life with 40 years earlier. His faith simply grew as it expressed itself in works.
 8. Verse 21 – Justification evidentially when Abraham was 125 years old. (He died at 175) He was living out the experience of what had already been his position.
 9. Verse 22 – faith works together with works. Works is simply the perfection or natural outgrowth of faith.
 10. Verse 23 – Justification by faith alone when Abraham was 85 years old.
 11. Verse 24 – the word “only” implies two different aspects to justification. There is a justification by faith, but there is also a justification by faith working.
 12. Rahab illustrates the truth that faith and works cannot be separated because all four aspects of justification took place on the same day. No person who is justified by faith can ever escape being justified by works. Two times from Abraham’s life are used to prevent confusing justification by faith with justification by works (which occurs later and flows out of the former). But Rahab is also picked to show that there is also an immediate demonstration of the genuineness of faith anytime faith is present.
 13. Just as body and spirit need each other, so faith and works need each other.

IV. Paul and James are in harmony

- A. Whereas Paul calls for “repentance from dead *works*” (Heb. 6:1; Gal. 3:1-9; etc) that are devoid of Spirit-given faith, James calls for repentance from “dead” faith which is devoid of Spirit engendered works (2:17,26). Both agree that what God has joined together, we must not separate.
- B. Both agree that the Christian life begins with a legal crediting of righteousness to our account
 1. James - “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (James 2:23). Note that nothing additional was needed to have righteousness legally credited. Faith received it.
 2. Paul - “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” (Gal. 3:6) “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.” (Rom. 4:5)
- C. Both agree that saving faith produces works.
 1. James – “faith was working” (2:22)
 2. Paul – “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6); “those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works” (Tit. 3:8); “the work of faith with power” (2 Thes. 1:11); “your work of faith” (1 Thes. 1:3); “the just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11).
- D. Both affirm that justification by faith is for the sinner (not the saint) and that justification by works is for the saint who is already saved (not the sinner).
 1. James – Abraham in verse 23 was an uncircumcised pagan, and all that was required for God to credit to him righteousness was that he “believed.” Abraham in verse 21 had been a saint for 40 years, and his justified state was shown by his works.
 2. Paul – “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (Rom. 4:5)

- V. Conclusion: Our justification before God rests in Christ’s righteousness alone and is received by faith alone. Our justification before others is demonstrated by a faith working in the power of the Holy Spirit and showing forth sanctification. You cannot claim to be saved if you have no faith in Christ’s righteousness. But neither can you claim to be saved if you have no works, since works is always the fruit of true saving faith.