

“Faith, without Works, Is Dead”
(James 2:14-26)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. This morning, we considered what faith is:
 - a. What is to be believed - “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3) – and how we are to respond to it.
 - b. When we talk about how we are to respond savingly to it, we need to include at least these elements:
 - (i) Right content/doctrine.
 - (ii) Assent to that doctrine; belief that doctrine is true.
 - (iii) And trust in the One that doctrine/teaching reveals.
 - (iv) This last is only possible if our hearts are changed, if we love Christ.
 - (v) This is what sets the faith of the believer apart from the faith of demons (James 2:19).

2. We also considered that it is faith alone that saves.
 - a. Not *my act* of believing on the Lord Jesus Christ: that would turn salvation into a work of faith.
 - b. But my believing/trusting in Him/His merits to save me, apart from my works.
 - (i) It is true, as we’ll see this evening, that there is no justification without sanctification.
 - (ii) Good works must follow: there must be repentance if there is true faith.
 - (iii) But it is Christ’s righteousness alone, not our works that saves us.

B. Preview.

1. We need to have a biblically balanced view.
 - a. We know that Paul and James can’t contradict each other.
 - (i) Both wrote the inspired Word of God.
 - (ii) Therefore their writings must harmonize.
 - (iii) We must also guard ourselves from going too far one way or the other:
 - (a) If we err in one direction and say that we are saved by a faith that doesn’t produce the fruit of holiness, then we’ll end in antinomianism/ libertinism.
 - (b) But if we err in the other direction, as Rome did, by allowing works to become part of the meritorious basis of our justification, we’ll fall either into an Arminian error, or even worse, that of Pelagius/Finney.

 - b. Thankfully, the Lord is able to save even when someone has a faulty understanding of these things:
 - (i) But He does so in spite of what is taught, and not because of what is taught.
 - (ii) We don’t want to use this as an excuse for sloppy theology, but as an incentive to get it right: God works through the truth.

2. This evening, let’s consider how James should be understood in the light of the very clear teaching of Scripture that salvation is entirely of God’s grace and not of works.

- a. First, let's survey some of the views of those who have added works to salvation to see what it produces.
- b. Second, let's consider what James actually tells us about how works fit into salvation.

II. Sermon.

A. What happens when you add works to faith as the meritorious grounds of justification? As Reformed Christians, we take it for granted that you cannot add works to justification. But there are many who don't understand this.

1. Rome understands James as saying that works form part of the grounds of our justification.
 - a. Let me quote just one representative canon from the Council of Trent: CANON IX.- If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.
 - (i) Rome believes there is something we must do to obtain justification: it is not by faith alone; we must co-operate, or work with God; even faith is seen as a part of that cooperation.
 - (ii) We would certainly agree in the area of sanctification: we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12).
 - (iii) But it is by faith alone (Christ and His righteousness alone) that we are justified, not by works of cooperation or any other kind.
 - b. So how does this affect the practice of Rome? Does it make any difference?
 - (i) There is a work the priest must do to give you grace: consecrate and minister the sacraments.
 - (ii) There is a work you must do to receive that grace:
 - (a) Receive the sacrament from the priest.
 - (b) Try not to lose that grace through venial and mortal sins.
 - (c) Do penance to satisfy the temporal punishment for your sins.
 - (d) Buy indulgences for yourself or those in purgatory.
 - (e) Pay for Masses, burn candles, incense to, venerate and pray to the saints and Mary, pray through the Rosary.
 - (f) Then for that part your works are not great enough to satisfy, you must suffer in purgatory for thousands to millions of years.
 - (g) You must do these things to obtain the grace of justification.
 - (h) It's only possible through the grace of Christ, but it can't be obtained apart from your works.
 - (i) The Bible says you are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in other words, by Christ alone.
2. Rome is not the only one who misunderstands:
 - a. Arminians believe there is a work you must do.
 - (i) They believe man has remaining goodness.
 - (ii) That goodness gives them the ability to choose Christ and salvation or reject Him.
 - (iii) You must exercise your faith to be saved.

- (iv) Many see faith as a righteous act that justifies us.
- (v) Lutherans believe you must not resist God's power when the Gospel is preached.
- (vi) Weslyans believe you must exercise the faith God gives you through a prevenient grace, which you may or may not exercise.

b. But among all modern views, Finney's is the worst; it's actually Pelagian:

- (i) Michael Horton writes, "Finney denied original sin. 'Moral depravity is sin itself, and not the cause of sin,' and he explicitly rejects original sin in his criticism of the Westminster Confession, referring to the notion of a sinful nature as 'anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma.' According to Finney, we are all born morally neutral, capable either of choosing good or evil. Finney argues throughout by employing the same arguments as the German rationalists, and yet because he was such a successful revivalist and "soul-winner," evangelicals call him their own. Finney held that our choices make us either good or sinful. Here Finney stands closer to the Pharisees than to Christ, who declared that the tree produced the fruit rather than vice versa. Finney's denial of the substitutionary atonement follows this denial of original sin. After all, according to Pelagius, if Adam can be said to be our agent of condemnation for no other reason than that we follow his poor example, then Christ is said to be our agent of redemption because we follow his good example. This is precisely what Finney argues: 'Example is the highest moral influence that can be exerted. If the benevolence manifested in the atonement does not subdue the selfishness of sinners, their case is hopeless.' But how can there be a 'benevolence manifested in the atonement' if the atonement does not atone? For those of us who need an atonement that not only subdues our selfishness, but covers the penalty for our selfishness, Finney's 'gospel,' like Pelagius's, is hardly good news."
- (ii) Finney denied Christ's obedience as the means of our salvation, "According to Finney, Christ could not have fulfilled the obedience we owed to God, since it would not be rational that one man could atone for the sins of anyone besides himself. Furthermore, 'If he obeyed the law as our substitute, then why should our own return to personal obedience be insisted upon as the sine qua non of our salvation?' One wonders if Finney was actually borrowing directly from Pelagius' writings."
- (iii) He denied the substitutionary character of the atonement, "Many assume 'that the atonement was a literal payment of a debt, which we have seen does not consist with the nature of the atonement. It is objected that, if the atonement was not the payment of the debt of sinners, but general in its nature, as we have maintained, it secures the salvation of no one. It is true, that the atonement, of itself, does not secure the salvation of any one.'"
- (iv) He denied that the new birth was of God's sovereign power, but was man's choice, "Furthermore, Finney denies that regeneration depends on the supernatural gift of God. It is not a change produced from the outside. 'If it were, sinners could not be required to effect it. No such change is needed, as the sinner has all the faculties and natural attributes requisite to render perfect obedience to God.' Therefore, '...regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference.' Those who insist that sinners depend on the mercy of God proclaim 'the most abominable and ruinous of all falsehoods. It is to mock [the sinner's] intelligence!'"

- (v) And he denied the imputed righteousness of Christ as the basis of our salvation, arguing that we are justified by our own works, “Of the doctrine of justification, Finney declared it to be ‘another gospel,’ since ‘for sinners to be forensically pronounced just, is impossible and absurd. As has already been said, there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law... The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption’ and ‘representing the atonement as the ground of the sinner's justification has been a sad occasion of stumbling to many’” (Horton, Pelagianism: The Religion of Natural Man).
- (vi) B. B. Warfield once observed of the theology of Charles Finney: ‘God might be eliminated from it entirely without essentially changing its character’” (Nick Bibile, God’s Grace or the Free Will of Man).
- (vii) Finney calls the Gospel of grace absurd at every point, and what he substitutes for it is a Gospel of works.
- (viii) We are not saved by our works, but on the basis of Christ’s work, imputed to us and received by faith alone.

B. On the other hand, we don’t want to exclude works from the picture entirely either.

1. James tells us that we cannot be saved by a faith that doesn’t produce works.
 - a. “Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (2:26).
 - b. To believe the facts but not act on them is to having nothing more than the demons have: they tremble, but are not saved (v. 19).
 - c. “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” The answer is no (v. 14).
 - (i) He says it’s the same thing as believing you are really concerned about the needs of your brother or sister, but doing nothing more than wishing them well (vv. 15-16). It shows you really aren’t concerned.
 - (ii) In the same way faith that doesn’t act on what it believes is not really faith.
 - (iii) Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself (v. 17).
2. In order to understand what James is saying, we need first to realize that when he speaks about Abraham’s justification (2:21) or Rahab’s (v. 25), he is not talking about forensic justification:
 - a. He does not say their works formed the meritorious basis of God’s declaring them just.
 - b. He is saying that works justified or vindicated their claim to having a truly gracious or saving faith.
3. James simply tells us here that if we really believe the Word of God, we’ll act on it.
 - a. Abraham showed that he really believed the promise of God.
 - (i) God promised Abraham that He would raise up seed through Isaac.
 - (ii) But God also told Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering – which meant to kill him – before he had any children.
 - (iii) Therefore, God must be intending to raise Isaac from the dead: His promise can’t fail.

- (iv) And so Abraham showed his belief by doing what God told him to do, and he receive Isaac back (Heb. 11:19).
 - (v) The fact that he was willing to do this showed that his faith had been perfected: had come to bear the fruit that faith is meant to produce: to believe the things that can't be seen, to trust God.
- b. Rahab did the same thing.
- (i) She believed the Word of God.
 - (ii) She hid the spies, but sent the messengers out a different way.
 - (iii) She was willing to lay her life on the line for something she hadn't seen with her eyes, but with the eyes of faith.
- c. In both cases, Abraham and Rahab justified their claim to faith by the way they lived.
- (i) It is not enough to say that you have faith.
 - (ii) Your life will show that you have it, if you really do.
 - (iii) If our faith is followed by works, and works done for the right reason, we have justifying faith.
 - (iv) But if we have a naked faith, a faith without action, without change, without obedience, we have a dead faith that will not save us.
 - (a) This is the error of the Antinomian/easy-believism.
 - (b) They believe they can be saved apart from sanctification/obedience to God's Law.
 - (c) But James tells us this is impossible: if we really believe, if we really trust God, if we really love Him, if we have the Spirit of God in us, we will do good works (John 15).
4. We are not saved by our works, but we are also not saved by a faith that doesn't produce works.
- a. As the Reformers said, we are saved by grace through faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.
 - b. And so examine your lives by what James says here.
 - c. If you're trusting in your works at all, even the act of faith, repent and trust in Christ alone.
 - d. If you trusting in the fact that God will save you no matter how disobedient you are or if you never get serious about serving and obeying Him, repent, trust in Him and begin to do the works He calls you to.
 - e. And don't forget, all that James is telling us we must do is already in our hearts to do, if we are true believers.
 - (i) Basically, he's telling us to love God enough to trust Him and obey.
 - (ii) He's telling us to love our neighbor enough to take care of his needs when he is in need.
 - (iii) The desire to do these things should already be in our hearts, even if the doing of it isn't sometimes.
 - (iv) May the Lord apply this as each of us needs to hear it. Amen.