

“Works Are the Perfecting of Faith”  
(James 2:22)

Introduction: The Bible is full of admonitions to us as Christians to be busy and about our Father’s work. A great majority of the New Testament letters to the churches -- after laying the foundation of the Christian faith in the person and work of Christ -- deal with how the Christian ought to live, if he has received the grace of God. The sermon on Matthew 7:12, which reminded us that we ought to treat others the way that we would like to be treated, deals with this theme. The sermon this morning on the imminent return of Christ and the necessity of seriousness and sobriety for the purpose of devoting ourselves to prayer, reminds us of this. As I look back over all the sermons that I have preached since coming to the church, by far the majority of them deal with the issue of sanctification. And why is this? It is because this is the most important doctrine in Scripture, practically speaking. The Lord tells us in His Word that no one can ever save themselves. It is the work of Christ and Christ alone, as He is embraced and received by faith that alone can justify a man in the presence of God. This is the foundational doctrine upon which the church is built. But the important question which always rises for us in this connection is, How may we know that we have been justified? How may we know that we have truly embraced the Lord Jesus Christ, that we have believed on Him unto salvation, and that we do not have merely a historical faith in the Son of God, a mere believe in the truth of the facts? The bottom line is whether or not we are growing in our sanctification. The author to the Hebrews writes, “Follow peace with all *men*, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). That is why I believe it is so important for us to carefully examine our lives to see if we are in fact growing in holiness. If it is that without which we will not see the Lord, then we must have it, or be forever lost.

Our purpose here on the Lord’s Day is to worship the Lord, to be equipped for His service, and to prepare our souls for the day of His final judgment. What better way to be equipped for service and prepared for judgment, than to know that we have a sure foundation for the future. Without it, we are rendered weak and useless in our Lord’s service. For until it is ours we will not be able to serve Him with the joy and enthusiasm that we should. And if our assurance is not a sound one, and we are only fooling ourselves, we will never be able to serve the Lord as we ought. His strength will not be ours. We will not have a true desire to serve Him. We will only walk blindly into the eternal fire on that final day. But where there is a sound assurance, what encouragement this gives us to stir our hearts daily with love and affection for the Lord, to serve Him with all that is within us, and to give Him the worship that is His due. You can see how all of our Christian experience hinges on whether or not we have true grace in our souls. Remember that the Lord has ordained for this life to be a time of testing for us to see whether or not His grace is in our hearts, that we might know before the judgment what the verdict will be, in order that if it is not there, we might seek the Lord while He may be found, or if it is there, to give Him glory and to give us strength.

But, of course, with the great focus on godly living in Scripture, there is always the danger of slipping into legalism. Some people confuse evangelical obedience, which is the true obedience out of a heart of love for God, with legalism. Whenever you talk about the necessity of works, they cry out, “Legalism! Works salvation!” Now if you were trying to be justified before God by your works, you would be a legalist and would fall under the curse. Paul writes, “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘CURSED IS

EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.’ Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH’” (Gal. 3:10-11).

What I would like for us to look at this evening, then, is the relationship which exists between faith and works, to see that we are not saved by our works, and yet in another sense we cannot be saved apart from them. What James tells us is that,

*Faith is finished by our works.*

## **I. James Says That Faith Works with Works, and as a Result of Works, Faith Is Perfected.**

### **A. Realize, First of All, What a Work Is and What It Is Not.**

1. Some people equate works with legalism.
  - a. There are professing Christians who when they hear about works, they automatically assume that it will lead to legalism.
  - b. And so they tend to remove works from the picture, until they are eliminated altogether.
  - c. We call such people antinomians. They are against the Law in principle thinking that it introduces a legal principle into salvation.
2. But we need to distinguish those works which we do in order to be justified and those works which are necessary to our having been justified.
  - a. The word “work” is not a dirty work.
  - b. Yes, it is true that if you trust in your works to save you, you are under a curse.
  - c. But to do works for the Lord Jesus Christ out of thankfulness for mercies received does not put you under the curse, but puts you into the category of the godly.
  - d. A work is simply an act of obedience to the Lord. It is not the work itself that is bad, but it is the intent behind it that can be.
  - e. James tells us that works are actually necessary for our salvation. Far from being anathema by doing them, we are anathema if we do not do them.
  - f. But we must understand in what sense he means this.

### **B. Works Are Necessary for Our Salvation, Not in the Sense that by Them We Are Earning Salvation, But by Doing Them We Are Showing that We Have the True Faith Which Actually Saves.**

1. First, he tells us outright that a faith which is not accompanied by works is a dead faith.
  - a. “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (v. 17).
  - b. A dead faith is a faith which cannot save. It has no life. It produces no fruits in the life of its possessor.
  - c. He says in verse 14, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” The implied answer is, of course, no!
  - d. He says, “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?” (vv. 15-16).
  - e. “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (v. 17).
  - f. A person may profess to have faith, but if he has no works that show its truthfulness,

then he has only a bare profession and not the genuine article.

- g. James points to the fact that the devils believe. They know and believe a lot more than you or I do. And yet they shudder. They realize that simply knowing and believing the facts are not enough. They are not able to bring forth the fruits of godliness, because they do not have saving faith.
2. However, a profession of faith, accompanied by the fruits of godliness, shows that you have true faith.
    - a. James writes that Rahab not only believed the report about the true God and what He said He was going to do, she believed it enough to act upon it.
    - b. She received the messengers, the spies from Israel, and sent them out another way. She did not betray them into the hands of her own countrymen, but hid them and protected them. She acted on what she believed.
    - c. Abraham also showed that he not only believed what God had said, but also placed his trust in what He said He would do.
    - d. God of course knew before He required of Abraham that he sacrifice his son, that he had true faith. But again, the Lord was testing Abraham to show him what was in his own heart, to the praise and glory of God's marvelous grace.
    - e. And Abraham, in faith, offered up his son on that altar. And in his act, or work of obedience, his faith was finished or completed.
    - f. And this is how we might know whether or not we have saving faith. This faith, this grace, is given to us in order that we might be obedient to the Lord. Paul writes, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).
    - g. And when our lives actually bring forth the fruits of obedience, then faith reaches the end for which it was created in us: it is perfected or brought to its completion and demonstrated to be true saving faith.
    - h. The same thing is true of our profession of love to God. It is also completed or perfected and finished by our works.
    - i. John writes, in 1 John 2:4-5, "The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him."
    - j. He says again in chapter 4:12, "If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us," and in verses 16-18, "And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love."
    - k. God's love in us finds its fulfillment or its completion in our actually loving one another. He says in the preceding chapter, "But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (3:17-18).
    - l. If we have this love and it is working in us and through us, then it gives us a strong

ground for our assurance in the day of judgment. “Perfect love”, or this finished love, “casts out fear.”

- m. Grace, working through us as faith or love, or really faith working by love (Gal. 5:6), is perfected or finished when it produces holy practice. When it produces that for which it is intended, then it is shown to be real.
- n. The same is true of a fruit tree. Its purpose is not fulfilled when it is planted, when it sends forth a shoot above the ground, when it grows branches, or puts forth leaves or blossoms. But its purpose is fulfilled when it actually begins to bear fruit, for that is why it was created. In the same way, when your life brings forth the fruit of holy living, then you have the strongest evidence of true grace in the heart (Edwards *RA* 354-55).
- o. Faith without works is dead. But faith working with the works, brings about the completion and perfection of that faith.
- p. And so works done in obedience to the Lord out of thankfulness, not to earn salvation, are so far from being legalistic, that they are actually found to be necessary in a God’s gracious working in our lives, or grace is not there.

## **II. Let Us Now Consider the Objection that Emphasizing Works Will Lead to Legalism.**

- A. First Of All, It Is Not Inconsistent to Put Works and Grace Together in this Way.
  - 1. Is a holy life inconsistent with God’s gracious dealings in our lives? Isn’t it when we try to earn God’s favor and approval with our works that we run into the legalistic heresy?
  - 2. The fact that our works do not and cannot make us acceptable to God does not mean that there can be nothing in our works which show that we have come to Christ.
  - 3. The Lord clearly teaches that if we know Christ and abide in Him, we will bear much fruit (John 15).
  - 4. If you want to reject that idea that good works are the evidence that we have come to know Christ, then you will have to reject all evidence as well on the same grounds, such as love for God, self-denial to follow Him, Christ-likeness, joy in the Holy Spirit, the desire to exalt Christ above yourself, a heart which is fully given to Him, and holy thoughts and desires.
    - a. None of these things will commend us to God either, but all of them are evidences that we have come to know Him.
    - b. Just because we are not justified by these things does not mean that they are not important. If you do away with the importance of works simply because they cannot earn salvation, then you also need to eliminate these works as being unimportant.
  - 5. James apparently did not think that it was legalistic to describe Abraham as being justified by works in this sense.
  - 6. Neither did God think it was so, where He says in Revelation 21:6, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost,” but then in the very next verse, says, “He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son,” as though it was by works. It is of free grace, for it is without cost. But one must also overcome to inherit the blessing.

7. The same thing can be seen in Matthew 11:28-30, where Christ, after saying, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,” says, “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.” It seems that taking Christ’s yoke and following His example are necessary in order to gain His rest.
  8. And also in the great promise of forgiveness in the OT prophet Isaiah, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool” (1:16-18). Grace is set forth with the qualification of holiness.
  9. In Proverbs 9, we read of the free offer of wisdom to all who will come, and yet we also see the requirement of holiness. “Whoever is naive, let him turn in here! To him who lacks understanding she says, ‘Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake *your* folly and live, and proceed in the way of understanding” (vv. 4-6).
  10. From these things we see that free grace and the necessity of holy living are time and time again joined in Scripture. It does not take away from the freeness of God’s grace that holy practice is the primary evidence that you have spiritual life. It was for this purpose that He gave His grace to you in the first place: that you might be holy.
  11. There is also nothing legalistic about saying that if you have true saving faith that the main evidence that you do will be a life of holy fruit or works. It in no way takes away from the glory of Christ or your dependence on His righteousness, for you are not earning your salvation; nor from the glory of God and dependence on His mercy, for you are still fully dependent on it.
  12. Don’t let the word “works” fool you. Holy works, as a necessary evidence of true and saving grace, does not equal legalism, anymore than to say that it is legalistic for you to have faith to be saved. Both are the gift of His free grace.
- B. Lastly, We Should Consider that If Our Lord Stresses the Importance of Works, Which He Does, It Would Be Very Foolish for Us to Try and Belittle Their Importance, and Insist on Some Other Evidence of His Grace.
1. We should not draw our assurance from anything else: not from the fact that we think we believe in Christ, or from some kind of peace in our hearts or an emotional experience we had when we came to Him.
  2. There is no better evidence that we should look for than that of a life of self-denial in order to follow the ways of Christ in the service of God.
  3. John tells us in 1 John 3:7-8, “Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil.” And in verses 9-10, he writes, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.” What could be more clear than this: The one who practices righteousness is righteous even as He is righteous.
  4. And lest we should be tempted to come up with our own tests, Agur warns us in

Proverbs 30:5, 6, “Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar.”

5. The fact is we cannot trust our own judgment. We must rest upon the Lord's and His alone. God has insisted in His Word that a holy life is necessary to a true profession of faith. And seeing how absolutely vital this is to true religion, we cannot afford to overlook its implications in our own lives.
6. Do our own lives vindicate our claims to having a true and saving faith? Or do we fail the test and find only a dead faith? The answer to this question will determine our eternal state. Let us face it squarely then and not deceive ourselves. If His grace is not there, then seek Him until He gives it to you. If it is there, then stir it up to greater love and good works that you might have a full assurance of faith to the end.
7. Just think of what an impact it would make on the world if we would only live the way Christ calls us to? It would do more to convince the world of the reality of Christ than all of the sermons that could ever be preached.
8. May the Lord finish His work in us and perfect the faith He has put in our hearts. May He give us the grace to deny ourselves, to give ourselves fully to Him in His service, and to walk according to His holy Law, both now and forever. Amen.