

Justification of Faith

Paul makes salvation by faith alone an absolute.¹ According to his sound doctrine, our faith justifies us, or proves us, to be pronounced “not guilty” of all charges of sin before the judgment seat of God. While it may appear that James is making a case for justification through good works, upon peering² more intently into his argument it is not that our works that justify us, but rather our faith is proved –or justified—by our works. Our good works do not testify or bring us to the point of salvation; they reveal the quality of our faith. Perhaps James isn’t saying that good works alone are required for salvation, but that both faith and its resultant good works³ prove that faith which does not act is not *true* faith. True faith always manifests itself in good works. Jesus’ own teaching tells us that we will know if one has true faith by the good works he produces. Only a good tree produces good fruit, and evil tree only produces evil fruit. An evil tree cannot produce good fruit.⁴ For James, true faith is active and reveals itself through actions which are the good works Paul speaks of in Ephesians 2:8-10.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV)

God has a bigger plan than just our individual salvation guaranteed by our faith. Salvation and faith are just the beginning of his plan for our part in his grand scheme of salvation history. According to Ephesians 2:8-10 works don’t save us, our faith saves us and that faith is what transforms us and prepares us to do the good works God would have us do in the world. Good works that will reveal his presence and love in the world; and bring others to faith in him, as well.

While we do have the freedom to live not in accordance with the law – we can choose to be obedient or not – but our “fruit” will reveal our faith. What fruit is borne of living outside the parameters of the “*perfect law that gives freedom?*” Living outside the law leads to sin, bondage to sin, and eventually death. That is hardly freedom and certainly not “good fruit”. James even goes on to say, “If a person keeps on saying he or she has faith but

¹ Romans 4:24-25, 10:8-12

² Just as James described “looking intently” or “peering intently” into the perfect law as a guide to our behavior (James 1:25), I suggest we “look intently” or study carefully his argument regarding the justification of faith.

³ Good works are dependent upon faith for their very existence and completion

⁴ Matthew 12:33-36

keeps on having no works then the person may not truly be saved!”⁵ While works may not guarantee salvation, they certainly reveal or prove the existence of faith. That means it is quite possible for someone to claim to have faith, possibly even believe they have faith, but choose to live in disobedience with the law. Choosing to disobey the law would require a believer to reject and ignore the influence of the Holy Spirit as it attempts to convict the heart of the believer of its transgressions. He will choose to go on in the same way as he did before he came to “faith” believing that God will forgive him of his transgressions, his disobedience; he will rationalize away his sins and deceive himself in the process. Mere intellectual acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord isn’t sufficient faith if the believer doesn’t submit in obedience to the Lord. James points out that even the demons believe Jesus is who he says he is – and that causes them to shudder in fear because they know the truth and still reject him.⁶ The human heart is more than capable of this kind of self-deception which James warns against. A person’s heart or will wants what it wants and will find a way to rationalize its’ desire. Giving up self-sovereignty in favor of true obedience to God is not what the heart wants – it wants to please itself.

If you have been living your life believing that acknowledging Jesus as your savior but nothing else in your life reflects that belief; or if there is no outward sign of your faith for others to see, do not be deceived! Perhaps some self-examination of your faith is in order. Please take this lesson today as a direct pricking of your conscience by the Holy Spirit attempting to get through to you. If this is you, please recommit yourself to Jesus’ saving grace and love; and, ask that he transform your heart through the power of the Holy Spirit. His love combined with your renewed faith will flow forth in good works from your hands. You have only to ask and he will grant your desire. There will be no rejection or condemnation on his part. It is his pricking your heart at this moment to draw your attention because of his desperate and jealous love for you. He wants you to rest assured in not only his love for you, but also your future with him. If you find this lesson speaking directly to you today and you need to recommit yourself to the Lord, after praying to him share this realization with someone in your class or someone who can help keep you accountable to your decision. Your very future may depend upon it.

⁵ Translation from Word Biblical Commentary

⁶ James 2:19; Mark 3:11, 5:7