

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scriptures: James 2:19-27; Romans 3:21-4:11

"Faith without Works Is DEAD!"

A CONTRADICTION?

During my college years I had the opportunity to take classes on the Bible. And the textbooks that could be used varied in their approach to the Scriptures. In other words, they would be written with a bias. Everyone in life has a bias. I don't know if you know that or not. In other words, everyone looks at things from a particular perspective that actually leads to different conclusions when approaching the same subject. For example, if I don't believe in God, that is a bias; and I will miss not only how God makes Himself known in creation in the natural world, but I won't pay attention to the spiritual claims and wisdom that come from God's Word. If I have bias that miracles can't happen, not only will I quickly dismiss them as fabrications by folks, but I might even put my head in the sand and say it just can't be; and I certainly will probably never have the opportunity to experience one.

The truth is I want to have God's bias. I want to have Christ's bias. I want to see things the way God sees them. I want to believe what God says is true. So when it comes to God's Word, I have a bias that it is true and it can be trusted.

And so when it would come to a textbook on the Bible, the bias would usually be broken down into one of two major camps – those who believed that the Bible was true and God's Word, and those who believed that the Bible is merely an ancient writing that contains man's opinions about God. And for those who believe the Bible is merely man's word, the textbook would be quick to point out seeming contradictions in God's Word – all because it was thought that it is a product of man. One of those supposed contradictions was the one between faith and works.

According to several passages in Paul's letters – specifically Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians - man is justified by God by faith in God's grace and mercy. But here in the letter of James it appears that James writes that we are justified before God by faith AND works. Which is it? Especially since the emphasis on works became a predominant theme over time in the Roman Catholic tradition. And due to the excesses that this tradition embraced – recall the sale of indulgences – Martin Luther and others called on the Roman Catholic Church to reacquaint itself with the teachings of Paul. And so in the Protestant tradition and in the Anglican tradition, we emphasize that it is first and foremost by faith we are justified and therefore saved. Martin Luther took it a step further when he added the word "alone." We are "justified by faith alone" was the creed of the reformers.

FAITH OR WORKS?

So which is it? Are we saved by faith or by works or by both? Is there a contradiction at all? How can we address this fundamental issue that gets to the heart of Who God is and who we are as humans made in His image but fallen and cursed by sin – our self-centered nature. I believe as followers of Christ we not only need to know the difference, but by knowing what is taught by God's Word, we will not only have a better

understanding of our faith but we will be able to communicate it more effectively to anyone who asks about our faith or anyone we share the Gospel with.

Let's first look at a few passages from God's Word beginning with the call of Abram by God in Genesis, followed by a couple passages from the Apostle Paul before then turning back to our passage from **James 2**.

Genesis 15:1-6: *"After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."*

This passage should be the starting point when it comes to understanding the relationship of faith and works to our salvation. Like every human being who has ever lived or will live, Abram was a sinner and not worthy to stand before God. God promised Abram that he would have a son, many descendants, land, and through him all the world would be blessed – a reference to the future birth of the Messiah. For this to happen though, Abraham had to believe – he had to have faith; he had to trust in God and His Word. And as a result God accepted Abram and counted it to him as righteousness. In other words, God honored his belief.

We read later in **Genesis 24:1** that *"Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in every way."* God promised Abraham a life of blessing and that in fact happened. The starting point and the continuation was faith. And then that faith acted by following the Lord and what he said. Abraham did not always obey and he suffered the consequences (like when he listened to his wife Sarah to have a child through his maidservant Hagar!) but more often than not he did trust the Lord to the point when God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac, he did! He put that faith into practice. So faith is the means for God's grace to be received. Did Abraham do any work before God gave Him the promise? No. His right standing before God was to simply accept what God could do and not trust in what self can do.

Now turn with me to **Romans 3:21-4:12:** *"But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. 29Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. 31Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.*

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3For what does the

Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." 4Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, 6just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 7"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. 8"BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."

9Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." 10How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; 11and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, 12and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised."

And now let's look at **Eph. 2:8-10**: "Paul writes, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."*

Justification means to be justified before the Lord – to be declared righteous. Some use the phrase to describe its meaning, *"just as if I had never sinned."* Paul's point is clear. It doesn't matter how many good deeds one does – that will not make up for your sin, and it will not make it up to God, and it will not change the human heart. Doing good works does not even control the sin in our hearts. Only God's Holy Spirit can do that. And the life of the Spirit begins with the life of faith and the life of faith will continue with a life of action – a life of works.

So now let's go back to **James** and reread it in light of the Scriptures we just reviewed.

"What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

18But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." 19You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? 21Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. 24You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

James is simply addressing the issue if someone who says they are a believer but doesn't put their faith into practice, who may even go to church every Sunday, who may even know the Gospel inside and out, if their belief doesn't go from here to here and then out there, that faith is not genuine. It is not even not genuine but like a body that has no life, a body that has no spirit! The works don't justify us as righteous before God; only God can do that and He has through His Son Jesus Christ, but what the works do is justify our faith. They outwardly demonstrate what is really true in here (your heart). In other words, if faith is the foundation, works are the building; if faith is the provision and means of receiving God's grace, works are the proof and marks of that grace.

And you can maybe fool some people into thinking that you are a believer, but it will be hard to fool a true believer and impossible to fool God. God already knows our hearts, but when it comes to one another, the way I know if you are a believer is by the fruit that is in your life – the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of good works, and the fruit of letting others know that you are in fact a disciple of Christ.

Jesus said, "***If you love me, you will keep My commandments.***" And if you truly want to be His disciple, what must we do? Deny self! And that begins in here (our heart), but then goes out there in how we live (take up your cross) and follow – it means keep doing what we are doing each and every day.

And so if someone asks you, "Are you saved by faith and works?" What would you say? I would respond by saying, "It depends on what you mean." If you mean that the basis for our entrance into heaven is following a series of rules and regulations, I need to do this and that, I would say absolutely not. The basis for my entrance into heaven, the reason why you and I can have eternal life, is because of God's grace and mercy, period. I receive that grace and mercy by faith and nothing extra I do. It's not like what one Roman Catholic priest said at a man's funeral that one of our members attended some years ago. OK, we just need to say a few more prayers to push him over the wall into heaven. The reason why there is an emphasis on works in the Roman Catholic tradition is due to the doctrine of purgatory. The more good works we do, the less time we spend in purgatory. I realize that may be a simplistic view of their doctrine. They would say it is more complicated than that, but Jesus NEVER mentioned an intermediary state; and there was certainly never one mentioned in the Old Testament. Simply put, that is a false teaching, no matter how much one may say God is still working the good works in us.

And yet, once I receive that grace and mercy, if I truly have, there will be change in my life. And that change in my life will result in different actions, and those actions will produce results – fruit – and that fruit will be the evidence of my faith. If there is no evidence, then there is a problem. As someone has rightfully pointed out – if you were arrested for being a Christian, and you were brought into court and before a judge, would there be enough evidence in your life to convict you?

We certainly are not to judge others or point the finger; that is between them and the Lord, but we can know that God accepts us the way we are and is willing to promise us blessings in this life and eternal life in the life to come, but He does not expect us to stay the way we are. It will require faith, it will require change, it will mean action – but it will be the result of completely trusting in Him so that we can be the person He truly created us to be. It is why Paul said in ***Ephesians 2:10: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."***

In other words, God gives us the chance to choose and follow Him; and in our following, good works will result. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!