

JAMES 2-3 – FAITH & WORKS; THE DANGEROUS TONGUE



We continue with James chap. 2, where he gives us another wonderful pearl of truth by illustrating the *forgetful hearer's empty faith* in contrast with the *doers' living faith*. The doers' faith is based *obeying* God's Word and *producing* goods works or results (see Eph. 2:10).

As James explains: "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

In effect, if one keeps God's "royal" law, as James 2:8 calls it, and truly loves of brother of the faith as himself, he will help him in his need.

God, in fact, has provided in His Word a law to ensure the help for the needy brother of the Church, which we apply. In this way, instead of doing it directly, which sometimes can embarrass the needy brother or even the giver, it is done through the *third tithe law* given by God.

It is one more link in the chain of faith, by being *doers* and not just hearers of the Word. Thus the help is given anonymously and the widow, the poor or the needy will not know who did it, only that he or she received it from the Church. As the royal law of God says, "At the end of every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates. And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are with in your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the Lord your God *may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do*" (Deut. 14:28-29).

We see here there is a *special blessing* related to keeping of the third tithe. Thus, in most places, the Church can give each month a modest amount according to the needs to widows and, in emergencies, to the needy of the Church (for more information, see ucg.org/study-papers/ThirdTithe).

There is also individual almsgiving, which is a voluntary amount of *immediate help* to any brother in need. Almsgiving is based on Deut. 15:7-11. Hence, being a doer of these laws of God shows one's faith has works and is not in vain.

James continues, "But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:18-20).

Here we find an excuse used by those who wish to abolish God's law. They said it is enough to just believe in God or in Jesus to obtain salvation, without the need to fulfill God's laws or produce "works" (Gk. *ergon*) or concrete results.

Peter adds, "But there were also *false prophets* among the people, even as there will be false teachers *among you*, who will bring in *destructive heresies*... And *many* will follow their *destructive ways*, because of whom *the way of truth will be blasphemed*... and *turned their backs on the holy commandments they were given*" (2 Pet. 2:1-2, 21 CEV).

So it was prophesied false teachers [religious leaders] would infiltrate who would teach that with grace, it would no longer be necessary to obey God's commandments. Jude also warned: "I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly *for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, *who turn the grace of our God into lewdness* [or license to break God's laws] and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4).

This is a very important and controversial subject--*faith and works* or *faith versus works*. Since James insisted faith without works was dead, Luther felt attacked and disparaged this epistle, calling it "full of straw" [or worthless]. But what Luther attacked were *Catholic works*, such as the sale of indulgences, which was supposed to reduce punishment in purgatory for sins. The Catholic Church also insisted one needed to fulfill its *seven*

sacraments to be saved. Luther and others "protested" against these Catholic "works."

Luther's protest initiated the "Protestant" Reformation, which soon led to a bloody war between the two sides--the Catholic armies of the Pope against the Protestant armies of Luther and others. This war split Europe in two and lasted on and off for 130 years! It led to the "Thirty Years War" (1618-1648). Imagine living in a religious war that lasted *thirty years* and in which *horrible crimes* were committed on both sides. It ended in a draw and the exhausted groups signed the Peace of Westphalia in 1649, which created the two religious zones that roughly exist to this day--northern Europe with a Protestant majority and southern Europe with a Catholic majority.

The astounding truth is that neither Luther nor the Papacy ever got it right in this controversy over faith and works! The churches under Luther and other leaders ended up with a vague faith using a cheap grace which denied the need to keep God's laws and with a tendency to the emotional side of things, which is seen even today in many Protestant and Evangelical churches.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church insisted on its "Catholic" works for salvation, which were artificially created by its theologians, focusing on seven sacraments such as penance, communion, infant baptism, confirmation, and extreme unction—*none* of which are found in the Bible.

However, the correct answer to this whole controversy is not in Luther's "faith alone theology" nor in "Catholic works theology," but instead, on *biblical* faith and *biblical* works!

So, James refutes the false faith without works idea by stating: "Was not Abraham our father justified *by works* when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that *faith was working together with his works, and by works, faith was made perfect?* And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also *justified by works* when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so *faith without works is dead also*" (James 2:21-26). As

The New International Testament Commentary explains: "The plain truth is that Paul and James deal with *entirely different subjects*. Paul, in his teaching on Justification, is combating *Jewish legalism*; James is making his protest, in the interests of morality, against *Antinomianism* [the belief that one does not have to keep God's law to be saved]. We may put it like this: they are *not* antagonists facing each other with crossed swords; *they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the Gospel*" (p. 53).

This is a truth *we must never forget* when some try to pit Paul against James. In reality, they are on the same side, defending the same truths, but against two different adversaries. Paul had to fight the Pharisaic heresy, which taught that keeping the law was sufficient in itself in order to be saved, without the need for Christ's atoning sacrifice.

As Alfred Edersheim notes, "As to the mode of salvation, their doctrine may be broadly summed up under the designation of work-righteousness--paradise might be entered by his *own* merits" (*Uses and Customs of the Jews*, p. 192).

Author George E. Ladd adds, "The Torah becomes *the only mediator* between God and man...Both righteousness and life in the world to come are secured by obeying the Law...All the commandments, both written and oral [i.e., the Pharisaic traditions] must be kept...Paul's life as a Jew was one of legalistic obedience to the Law. He himself tells us that he was a committed Jew, a Pharisee who was blameless in his obedience to the letter of the Law (Phil. 3:5-6). He was outstanding in his zeal not only for the written Law but also for the oral scribal traditions (Gal. 1:14)...In fact, the key to Paul's understanding of the Law lies in his devotion to the Law that had led to *pride* and *boasting* (Phil. 3:4-7)" (A Theology of the New Testament, pp. 497-500).

So, it is logical for Paul to attack the false Pharisaic notion that the Law was sufficient in itself to obtain salvation and thus, Christ's sacrifice was not needed to obtain forgiveness.

On the other hand, James was attacking those who wished to *abolish God's law* by saying that grace alone was sufficient, without doing anything else. He says that faith, or belief and commitment to God and His Word, has to be accompanied by Christian works

or it is a hollow faith. Yet he knows that keeping the law of God by itself is not enough, but that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is needed for the forgiveness of sins. As he has said: "My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to *have faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ* if you favor some people over others?" (James 2:1, TPT).

In short, James and Paul are talking about the same subject, but from different angles. They do not *contradict* each other, but rather *complement* each other. Paul focuses on the faith in Christ's sacrifice that saves and James on the works that show our faithfulness to God. The best biblical summary and quote on needing both -- *faith and works*, is: "Here is *the patience of the saints*, those who *keep the commandments of God* [or have biblical works] and *the faith of Jesus* [whose sacrifice saves us]" (Rev. 14:12).

Next, James explains a related issue on faith and works, about our tongue: If one has a living faith and works, based on the Word of God, what one says will be *consistent* with what one *does*. He says: "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a *perfect* [from *teleois*, or a spiritually mature] man, able also to *bridle* the whole body" (James 3:1-2).

James had noticed that some converts to Christianity wanted to rapidly become teachers of the Word--when they were not prepared for it. Some wanted to gain the prestige of the Rabbis without first becoming experienced leaders.

As Barclay notes, "It is James' conviction that teaching is a *dangerous occupation* for any man. His instrument is speech and his agent the tongue...The Christian teacher entered into a *perilous* heritage. In the Church, he took the place of the Rabbi in Judaism. There were many great and saintly Rabbis, but the Rabbi was treated in a way that was *liable to ruin the character* of any man. His very name means, 'My great one.' Everywhere he went he was treated with the utmost respect. It was actually held that a man's duty to his Rabbi exceeded his duty to his parents, because his parents only brought him into the life of this world but his teacher brought him into the life of the world to come. It was actually said that if a man's parents and a man's teacher were captured by an

enemy, the Rabbi must be ransomed first...It was desperately easy for a Rabbi to become the kind of person whom Jesus depicted, a spiritual tyrant, an ostentatious ornament of piety, a lover of the highest place at any function, a person who *gloried* in the almost subservient respect showed to him in public (Mt. 23:4-7). Every teacher runs the risk of becoming 'Sir Oracle.' No profession is more liable to beget *spiritual and intellectual pride*" (Daily Study Bible, notes on James 3:1).

James, in typical style, gives *six illustrations* to show the *dangers* of using the tongue in the wrong way. He says, "Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body" (James 3:3).

A normal horse weighs at least three times as much as a man and is much more powerful and faster. However, once the bridle or bit is put in the horse's mouth, it has to meekly obey instructions, for going against the bit is painful. As David said, "I will watch my ways so that I do not sin with my tongue. I will *bridle my mouth* while wicked people are in my presence" (Psalm 39:1). Thus, the wise man learns to control what he says and knows how to bridle his tongue in time. Then he will be apt to teach, as Proverbs 10:19 warns, "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise."

James now gives the second illustration: "Look also at *ships*: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires" (James 3:4-5).

A second-century writer described one of the great grain ships, like the one Paul traveled in: "The crew looked like a small army and said that they carried enough grain to feed everyone in the province of Attica for a year. And the safety of that great ship depended on a single man, controlling a big rudder with a small stick."

In the same way, much of our success and happiness also depends on how well we control our tongues in the home, in the marriage, with the children, in school, at work, and in the Church.

As Proverbs 18:21 also warns us, "The tongue has the power of *life and death*, and those who *love* to talk will have to *eat their own words*" (GW).