

“FAITH OR “DEED” CHRISTIANS?

James 2

What comes first, the chicken or the egg?

The chicken. It told the egg a funny joke, and he cracked up and died.

First came the egg, then the chicken, then rice, dessert, and the bill.

What comes first, our salvation or the good life we are to lead as Christians? If we center on St. Paul who wrote the book of Romans, it seems clear that faith is what saves. Paul quotes the words from Genesis that say, “Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” That should settle it. Faith, not works, saves us. There is nothing we have to do to be in a saving relationship with God.

We all get messages on the internet promising that if we sign up for this or that, we will get all kinds of benefits free of charge. If we have any life experience we know that it’s wise to ignore those messages. People can promise us all kinds of “free” stuff, but in the end there is always a catch, always something we have to pay. People get signed up to time shares that promise great places to stay at a great price. But then they get trapped in paying ever increasing prices to maintain the property.

That is what influences how we see being saved through faith. It seems too easy, too simple, too free. And we see the words of James in our second lesson. This is how he describes Abraham:

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

It sounds as though James is saying, in opposition to Paul, that Abraham was saved not by faith alone, but also by what he did. It is as if James is saying that you do need faith, but it takes faith plus actions to save you.

That understanding fits more in what we experience in life. We have to work for what we get. Employers have to have the faith that we will do a good job when they hire us, but we still have to prove that by how we perform. It is the same with those who give out scholarships. And even when people do things for us for free, there is often a catch, like they might want a favor in return from us in the future.

In addition to that the Bible seems to tell us that if we do not do well, we will be punished. Before the words in our second lesson from James we read, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.” This seems to coincide with the words of Jesus when He tells the disciples that He will come on the last day to judge the living and the dead. And this judgment will be based on what we do or fail to do. That sure sounds like our future depends not on what we believe, but what we do,

That may sound reasonable to us especially in how we experience life, but then our salvation depends not on Jesus, but what we do. We could say that it is 50-50 or even 90-10 Him and us. But even if even a small amount depends on us, then we are in big trouble. We sin. God created us without sin. Even if we have say only a tiny speck of sin, that spoils it all. The Bible uses the illustration of leaven, yeast. All it takes is a tiny bit to spread through the whole loaf. Either our salvation depends 100% on Jesus or we have no chance.

So is James telling us we are saved by works, not faith? Martin Luther saw how people could think that way. That is why he called James an epistle of straw. That is why it is vital to see the audience to James’ letter. Paul in Romans was writing to Christians in the capital of the pagan world. Many of those Christians were converted pagans. James was written to the early church in Jerusalem, a church filled with Christian Jews. These were people born and raised in devout Jewish families who had faith in God and knew His Word through the Old Testament. In Rome Paul was dealing with Christians who thought the non-Jewish Christians needed to obey the Old Testament laws given to the Jews. They were tempted to think that doing those laws was part of what saved them. In James’ situation the people all lived in those laws, not to be saved, but because that is how they were raised. Their problem was expressed earlier by James this way:

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

In light of this James reminds them of God’s judgment. That judgment is not the condemnation that those who reject Jesus will receive in the end. This is the judgment only for believers, the ones that will see how rich or how empty our lives have been because of what we do with the salvation God gives to us in Jesus. As James says, “Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.” James is talking to Christians alone, showing them that they shouldn’t use their belief in God as an excuse to not show mercy as God does.

Faith alone saves us. It is totally the work of God, so that we can be 100% certain of it. But that saving is never **alone**. Faith never exists on its own. It produces the love that moves

us to love as God first loved us. I heard it best explained as the “follow through” in sports. When you hit a baseball, a golf ball, or a tennis ball, there always needs to be follow through. The follow through happens after the ball has left you, but if you don’t have it, then you haven’t hit it correctly. The follow through is not necessary for hitting the ball, but as the necessary result of hitting the ball. If we really have faith in God, there will be results. We will want to hear God’s Word. We will want to help others without expecting anything in return. We will forgive as we have been forgiven. And this happens not because we have to, but because we want to as people of faith.

We see this in Abraham. When Paul says that Abraham was “justified,” he is talking about his legal situation. When a person was “justified” in a court, it meant that justice was done, the person received a punishment. But justified by faith means that justice is done through faith in Jesus, who took the punishment for us on the cross. Without any action on his own, Abraham was forgiven and put right with God through faith in God’s promises, which came true in Jesus. Abraham had faith in God in Genesis 15 long before Genesis 22 when he showed evidence of that faith by being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. James uses “justify” in the sense of proof. A person can “justify” what she says by giving evidence to back it up. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son Isaac in obedience to God was proof that he had faith. That act did not save Abraham, but gave evidence that he had saving faith.

There is no contest between “faith” versus “deeds” Christians. They are two sides of the same coin. When we have faith, the results of that, what the Bible calls the “fruits” of it will be there. They work together. As we go to Church, receive Holy Communion, gather with other Christians, and hear God’s Word, He strengthens our faith so that we want to do the deeds. And as we practice the deeds, that exercises that faith so that all the more want to have our faith strengthened. James urges us to not show partiality, to give not to receive in return, but out of God’s love that leads us to depend all the more on God. And as we get into God’s Word and hear the Gospel we are more moved to love as God loves us.

Faith and works—it is what we are in Christ Jesus. God bless us to trust totally in what He has done for us in Jesus and to live that out in response.