

We started our “Practical Christianity” series last week with the bold assertion that Christianity is both wicked smart and insanely practical. Furthermore, that Practical Christianity fills up what is physically “lacking” in Christ’s Body (Colossians 1:24), demonstrates the love of God in a practical way, and makes Christianity a “hands dirty, boots muddy, apron wearing” faith. We ended last week with an encouragement to balance out our faith, i.e., always keep learning it while always keep doing it. To start this balancing act, we distributed backpacks chockfull of food stuff and other necessities to give out to any homeless that we might encounter during our daily routines. Your exuberant responses means that we got to reboot the assembly line and produce more. Today, we continue our series with another insanely practical text from James 2:14-18

14 What good is it, if a person claims to have faith but has no works? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, “You have faith; I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

Previously in chapter 1 (v27), James espoused:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

As we saw in the “Good Samaritan” parable last week, and are seeing again today, practical Christianity is merely “seeing a need, meeting a need” and doing so across the broad spectrum of human suffering. However, Catholic monk turned Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, despised the apostle James’s teaching here, even going as far as to call his entire letter, “The Epistle of Straw.” He did so, not because of its practical real-world effect, he did love people after all, but because it seemed to fundamentally contradict the apostle Paul’s teaching that we are justified before God by faith and never by works. For a review, here are three of Paul’s major teachings on justification by faith.

Romans 3:28, We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Ephesians 2:8-9 By grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Galatians 2:16, We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So, we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

Allow me to quickly add that in Romans 4, Paul spends an entire chapter, beating the drum about Abraham, a.k.a., “The Father of Faith” being “justified by faith” and “not by works.” Luther was so heavily sided with Paul on the faith/works debate, that he launched the Protestant Reformation on the premise, “Sola Fidei” i.e., salvation by faith alone.

Permission to be a resident theologian? When we see passages that seemingly conflict, we need to work hard at the skill called “harmonizing.” After all, our eternal futures, as well as our happiness on earth, depends on getting this right. If we are saved by works, that means one thing. If we are saved by faith, quite another (Walberg Interview-Father Stu movie).

Which Works? Works of the Law

We begin by asking which “works” is Paul talking about and subsequently, which works is James? Without doing a deep dive, Paul is talking about “works of the law” in terms of the hundreds of commands found in the Old Testament “Torah” (first five books) which include the Mosaic Law. If you have been keeping up on your Cecil B. DeMille filmography, you know these laws are summarized in the “10 Commandments.” Congregationally speaking, Paul is dealing with folks who believe, because of their Jewish heritage, that one can still be saved by obeying these laws. In other words, they, like their ancestors, were trying to turn the “works of the law” into a stairway to heaven. Paul unequivocally declares that “works of the law” no matter how well kept, performed, or obeyed, will never merit salvation. Faith in who Jesus is, and what he has done, is the only thing that can save us.

Which Works? Works of Ministry

James, however, is dealing with a different problem. His folks were confident they were “saved by faith and not works.” Somewhere along the line, they began thinking, “I got faith. I’m good to go.” Maybe it was too much preaching on love and/or grace. Maybe they thought all they had to do was sit around all day and read the Bible. All we know is that this belief was causing them to neglect/disobey two-point blank scriptures. The first is Matthew 5:16:

Let your light shine before people, that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven.

The other is Ephesians 2:10 which immediately follows Paul’s “saved by faith and not works” declaration. 2:10 is an identity passage that clarifies who we are, and what we do, in Christ:

We are his workmanship, created in good works for Christ which he has prepared before the foundations of the world that we should do them.

The “works” James is referring to are not the aforementioned “works of the law” that Paul was describing, but rather the “works of ministry” which the believer does in Jesus’ Name for the glory of God and the sake of others. As Jesus’ half-brother, James had a front-row seat to Jesus’ ministry. He saw how Jesus was moved with great love and compassion for the least, lost, last, and lonely. From his personal experience, James theologizes, and justifiably so, that “works of ministry” should naturally flow out of the heart of anyone who claims to be “justified by faith.” Thus, he could unflinchingly say in 2:24:

A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone...

...and not be contradicting Paul. Paul even called these kinds of works, “good works.” Furthermore, James is justified in asking the two good “good” rhetorical questions in v14,16:

*What good is it if a person claims to have faith but has no works?
What good is a faith that does nothing to help people?*

“No Bueno,” we all said in broken Spanish. A workless faith is a worthless faith because it doesn’t work. It is good for nothing, dead as a doornail, inconsequential, and won’t save one soul. Therefore,

we must reject a do-nothing faith and adopt a do-something faith, the kind James possessed. Listen to how he describes it in v18:

I will show you my faith by what I do.

To summarize, Paul is talking about “works of the law” which some posited as necessary “For Salvation.” James is talking about “works of ministry” which are “From Salvation.” Works For Salvation? Never! Works from Salvation? Always!

Conclusion: Zealous!

Earlier I said that our eternal futures and our happiness on earth depend on getting this faith/works balance right. I think we did a good job communicating what the apostles meant. Therefore, let us be, as Paul says in Titus 2:14, “zealous for good works” because:

- They naturally flow from the heart of the person that has been justified by faith.
- They are the external evidence that we have been genuinely saved.
- They will form the basis of our judgment and subsequent rewards in heaven (the more we do, the more we get).
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Our Practical Christianity application this week is to start a clothing ministry for the underserved in our community.