

James 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-18

My brothers, have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without showing favoritism. ²For example, suppose a man enters your worship assembly wearing gold rings and fine clothing, and a poor man also enters wearing filthy clothing. ³If you look with favor on the man wearing fine clothing and say, “Sit here in this good place,” but you tell the poor man, “Stand over there” or “Sit down here at my feet,” ⁴have you not made a distinction among yourselves and become judges with evil opinions? ⁵Listen, my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to those who love him?

⁸However, if you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, since you are convicted by this law as transgressors.

¹⁰In fact, whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says that he has faith but has no works? Such “faith” cannot save him, can it? ¹⁵If a brother or sister needs clothes and lacks daily food ¹⁶and one of you tells them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but does not give them what their body needs, what good is it? ¹⁷So also, such “faith,” if it is alone and has no works, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

Is Faith Alone Dead?

I.

Faith alone. Faith alone. Faith alone. That is one of the chief tenets of the Lutheran Church, isn't it? It is drilled into us. A person is saved by grace alone, through faith alone. The more complete doctrine is “Justification by faith alone.” To justify is to declare righteous. Luther and like-minded theologians of the Reformation said that this teaching is the teaching on which the Christian Church either stands or falls.

Paul's Letter to the Romans is filled with the doctrine of faith alone. Paul writes: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by works of the law... We conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law” (Romans 3:20,28, EHV). Faith alone. Period.

The Smallcald Articles is one of the major Lutheran Confessions. That confessional document lists the teaching of justification by faith alone before any others and calls it “the chief article” (Smalcald: II, art. i.). The article continues: “This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us” (Smalcald: II, art. i, par. 4).

James says: “Faith, if it is alone and has no works, is dead” (James 2:17, EHV). Uh oh. Lutherans, we have a problem. Paul says faith alone. The Lutheran Confessions insist that the Apostle Paul is right, and that if this teaching falls, there is nothing left. Does James say faith plus works? It certainly *seems* that way!

II.

But is James speaking about justification at all? In another way of asking the question, is James talking about *coming* to faith? Today's lesson starts out: “My brothers, have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ...” (James 2:1, EHV). In addressing his readers as “brothers,” James indicates he was writing to fellow believers. Rather than speaking to the heathen and laying out a pathway to salvation, James is writing to teach *believers* to *live* in a way that demonstrates faith.

There were a bunch of people back then who misused what Paul had said in his letters, perhaps

especially the Letter to the Romans. Maybe the concept of being declared righteous and holy in God's eyes "by faith, without the works of the law" the way Paul had taught it had been misunderstood.

Perhaps Paul's teaching had been deliberately twisted. Since God has saved people "without the works of the law," we don't *have* to live according to the moral law at all—do whatever you want, sin without consequences. Of course, that wasn't what Paul meant at all. Maybe some others didn't use it as an excuse for deliberate disobedience, but also didn't think they had to do anything to show their faith. Faith alone gave them an excuse to sit home and do nothing.

There must have been a lot of misguided Lutherans back in James' day.

James gave an illustration: "For example, suppose a man enters your worship assembly wearing gold rings and fine clothing, and a poor man also enters wearing filthy clothing. ³If you look with favor on the man wearing fine clothing and say, 'Sit here in this good place,' but you tell the poor man, 'Stand over there' or 'Sit down here at my feet,' ⁴have you not made a distinction among yourselves and become judges with evil opinions?" (James 2:2-4, EHV).

This exact scenario plays out today, doesn't it? It is easier to accept and welcome someone who is well-dressed and suave, but more difficult to be welcoming to someone who doesn't measure up to our expectations.

"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, since you are convicted by this law as transgressors" (James 2:8-9, EHV).

James says the royal law is to "love your neighbor as yourself." He calls it a "royal" law because it is the law of love that has been given by God. "Love your neighbor as yourself summarizes the second table of the Ten Commandments. Jesus made the summary himself for both tables when he said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22, 37-39, EHV). Looking at that passage, it is easy to further summarize the Moral Law of God with one word—love.

So then... love. Just do it. Of course, last week we were reminded: "I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my sinful flesh. The desire to do good is present with me, but I am not able to carry it out. ¹⁹ So I fail to do the good I want to do. Instead, the evil I do not want to do, that is what I keep doing" (Romans 7:18-19, EHV). Put that in terms of love. The *desire* to love is present with me, but I am not able to carry it out. I fail to show the love I want to show.

James reminds us: "In fact, whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10, EHV). It's pretty apparent that James isn't trying to tell you that you will be declared righteous by what you do—by your works. After all, every one of us would have to admit that we have broken at least *one* of the commands in God's Moral Law. If you've broken one, you are guilty of breaking all.

Is what James is saying here, then, just a bunch of empty words? Are we doomed to just live our lives in perpetual disappointment to God?

III.

"Listen, my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5, EHV). Jesus said something similar: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3, EHV). Whether you are rich or poor by the world's standards, you will be denigrated by the world.

But God has chosen you to be his own. He has given you the gift of faith in Jesus as your Savior. You have been declared righteous in God's eyes through faith alone.

Remember James' illustration of the rich and poor coming into church and being treated differently? What if God did that to you? What if God got out his giant checklist to see how your life and actions and words stacked up when compared with his Moral Law? If he did, you wouldn't fare very well. You would always be forced to try harder to get right with God, and you would always run up against what James said: "Whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10, EHV).

But God *doesn't* get out the scorecard. God *doesn't* condemn you to eternal death because you have failed to keep the royal law of love, and have failed to love your neighbor as yourself every waking moment of every day.

Jesus kept the royal law *for* you. He died to pay the price for the failures you and I experience every day to keep the moral law. He rose again, victorious over death. One might say that faith is a work, but it isn't our *own* work. *Jesus* did the work. Faith is the work of God. Faith without Christ is dead.

IV.

"But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18, EHV).

To be sure, you and I have had shocking and inexcusable breaches of Christian conduct. We have failed to show Christian love many times over. Faith alone. Faith alone. Faith alone. That doctrine of justification through faith alone—the teaching that we have been declared righteous in God's eyes because of what *Jesus* has done for us, not on the basis of what we have *failed* to do, is a great comfort.

You have faith alone in what Jesus has done. James says in this passage that actions that demonstrate your faith are naturally going to flow from you because of love for Jesus.

Luther once preached a sermon on a passage from Romans, part of which was explaining how love fulfills the law. He said: "Love and works do not make the person different or justify him, but the person must first have become different and justified if he is to love and do the works. Nevertheless, love and works show and prove that the person has already become justified and different, since such works could not happen if the person were not already without sin and godly" (Luther's Works, Vol. 76, p. 276).

You are profoundly different now. Faith animates you. Faith motivates you. Faith means that you live in a way that demonstrates who you are and what you are.

"'Faith,' if it is alone and has no works, is dead...¹⁸ I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:17, EHV).

"We conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law" (Romans 3:28, EHV).

It is a mistake to think that these passages conflict with each other. They are talking about different points. There is no problem for Lutheran doctrine.

A person is justified, or declared righteous, by faith in Jesus as the Savior without any actions on our part that contribute to us being declared righteous. That is what Paul said to the Romans.

With a heart that is filled with thankfulness to God for providing such a glorious declaration of righteousness, we now have new life. That new life shows itself in the way we live for the Lord Jesus. That is what James reminds us of in his letter.

Work for the Lord because you believe. Amen.