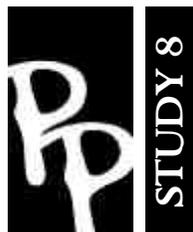


LIVING FAITH;

IT HAS TO WORK



James 2:20-26

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: James and Paul
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

James is still compelling us to think seriously about the true nature of the faith that arises from being born again and which unites us to Jesus Christ. Whilst our reconciliation to God (through justification) is received through faith, without any reference whatever to works, that faith will always show itself in love toward God and toward other people. So important does he consider this theme that he turns now to two challenging illustrations. The first one is from the life of Abraham, who was honoured by the Jews as the founder of their nation, so James' readers would be impressed with whatever was said about him. The second is an incident in the life of Rahab, who was a Gentile and a prostitute. Any Gentile Christian reading James' letter would be especially challenged by her example.

What these verses mean

Verse 20

You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

James seems to have learnt from experience that the people to whom he wrote were either slow to understand what he was saying, or slow to apply it to themselves. There is always a danger with religious people that they separate their religion from their daily life. James calls such people

“foolish”. Here he calls faith without works useless in the sense of “barren” – like the fig tree in Mark 11:12-13 failing to bear any fruit. The person James has in mind is someone who has a lot to say, but who has little to show. There is eloquence and ignorance, because the Holy Spirit has not enlightened the mind and the person remains in spiritual darkness. One commentator describes this kind of person as the spiritually ignorant windbag.

Verse 21

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

To prove his point, James goes back into the Old Testament and brings out two incidents. The first one concerns Abraham when God told him to take his son Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there. James asks the question, “Was not Abraham considered righteous for what he did?” What did James mean? Is he really saying that God declared Abraham as being righteous because of what he did on Mount Moriah? The answer is no. These verses must be looked at from the point of view of faith and not of good deeds.

Verse 22

You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

The incident with Isaac, to which James refers, was one of action. This followed on much later to the time when Abraham believed in God's promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. It was then that God credited Abraham with being righteous (Gen. 15:6). Now James is putting these two things (faith and works) together and says that by this Abraham's faith was made “complete”. This means precisely what James has been teaching. The faith that saves is a faith that bears fruit. When this fruit is seen faith is fulfilled, which means it is proved to be real or complete. This is why he says that Abraham was “considered” righteous for what he did – he was shown to be so. This is the same sense in which the writer to the Hebrews uses Abraham's offering of Isaac (Heb. 11:17-19).

Verse 23

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,”

The key to understanding James correctly is to note that Abraham was accounted righteous (justified by faith) at a much earlier time (Gen. 15) than when he offered Isaac (Gen. 22). In that earlier case Abraham trusted the bare word of God. He was acting in faith and not by doing some deed. Paul, in writing to the Romans (4:12), says that Abraham believed in the promise of God before he was circumcised, which took place in Genesis 17. Paul,

when writing about justification by faith in his letters to the Galatians and Romans, and James in this passage, are both going back to the same incident of Genesis 15. So James is far from teaching that anyone is justified by works. By quoting this verse from Genesis 15, James is saying that Abraham's faith was proved to be genuine by what he did after God declared him to be righteous. This is how Scripture was proved to be genuine in what it said about Abraham's faith.

and he was called God's friend.

This is taken from two scriptures (2 Chr. 20:7 and Is. 41:8) and seems to reflect the degree into which Abraham was able to enter into the mind of God and harmonise with it (Gen. 18:17; John 8:56). For God to refer to Abraham as his friend was a wonderful privilege and beyond human reasoning. It was an act of grace (undeserved favour). This has much the same sense as when Jesus called his disciples his friends (John 15:15) as he shared some very profound teaching with them.

Verse 24

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

This verse has caused some believers a difficulty as they see a conflict between what Paul says about justification by faith alone and what James says here. (See Focus Point at the end of this study for a further discussion of Paul and James.) There is no contradiction when we consider this verse in the light of our interpretation of verses 20-23. We understand that when James here says "not by faith alone", he means that kind of faith that does not bear the fruit of suitable deeds. He is still persisting in his challenge to us to examine our faith to see if it is fruitful. A good way of understanding both Paul and James is to see how they use the word "justified". This is where appreciating the context of their writings is so important. Paul uses the word "justified" as God's declaration of how man is accepted on the basis of Christ's sacrificial death. James uses the word "justified" to speak of man's demonstration that his faith in Christ is genuine. At this point we notice that the kind of deeds in view here go far beyond the limited scope of love to our neighbours. The action of Abraham in offering his son Isaac was one of unquestioning obedience to God, and trust in the absolute power of God. Isaac was the son God gave Abraham by a miracle, and God had promised that a great nation would be born through him. Yet God commanded Abraham to sacrifice this very son and so tested Abraham's love and trust in God almost beyond human endurance. He passed that test with unquestioning obedience! (Gen.22.) Also, Abraham believed (had faith) that God could raise the dead (Heb.11:17-19) and he acted on the basis of that faith. James teaches us that the evidence of saving faith is a life of love and obedience to God.

Verse 25

In the same way, was not even the prostitute Rahab considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?

James now introduces his second illustration, Rahab. The story of Rahab is found in Joshua 2 and 6:22-23. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that what she did was because of her faith (Heb. 11:31). When reading the Old Testament story, we might admire what Rahab did, but without the New Testament comment, we might hesitate to attribute her actions to faith. This is an example of the importance of interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New. Since the New Testament tells us that Rahab had saving faith, we must accept that and interpret the story with that in mind. One reason for hesitation about attributing Rahab's action to faith would be the deception of sending the men who chased the spies the wrong way. The question arises as to whether the Lord condones such actions. Two answers at least seem to be possible. First, since it was a war situation, Rahab's action comes within the accepted practice of war which includes every possible attempt to deceive an enemy. Second, it is never reasonable to expect new converts immediately to understand or adopt every new standard of conduct. Sometimes the habits of the past take a long time to be recognised as wrong and to be discarded. Even if neither of these explanations is right, there is no reason here for us to practise deception in our dealings with others (1 Pet. 2:1). Rahab's deeds arising from her faith (expressed to the spies in Joshua 2:11) were acts of kindness to men in danger, and they were also an expression of her desire to give success to the kingdom of God.

Verse 26

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

James leaves us in no doubt how serious he feels this subject to be. This final thrust lacks nothing in clarity and severity. Having mentioned that faith without works is barren, or fruitless, he returns to the charge that it is dead (verse 17). Nothing could be plainer than this. Unless our faith arises from the work of the Holy Spirit within us, then it is of a different kind, it is not living faith, it will not issue in a life of love to God and to others; it is dead!



Summary

James was concerned to challenge the person who claims to be a Christian yet shows no evidence of this. This has been the main theme of the letter, brought out so clearly in chapter 2, verses 14-26 (Studies 7 and 8). In our previous study we saw

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Summary continued from page 4

James stressing that deeds without faith are unacceptable to God. Faith comes first and is confirmed by a life of love and practical help. James continues this teaching by using two examples of people from the Old Testament, Abraham and Rahab. We see from their lives the full scope of the kind of practical living that arises from a living faith. It is God-ward in seeking to please God by obedience and working for the advance of his kingdom. This practical living is also expressed in love, kindness and compassion to other people. James uses these two witnesses, a patriarch at one end of the social spectrum and a prostitute from the other end, to emphasise that this teaching applies to all, no matter what their background or upbringing.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Good works

I Introduction

1. James leaves us in no doubt that a living faith shows itself in a life of faith.
2. Like the good teacher he is, he does not leave us with a general principle, but gives us clear illustrations.
3. The conduct of Abraham and Rahab gives us a broad view of the life of faith.

II The life of faith is a life of devotion to God

The example of Abraham shows us a life of total commitment to God. In his offering of Isaac, Abraham was submitting his mind and heart to God.

1. HIS MIND – God’s command to offer Isaac was contrary to known reason, but Abraham obeyed God and trusted his wisdom, rather than his own. For us, the life of faith means submitting to God’s Word in every situation, whatever the cost.
2. HIS HEART – Abraham loved his son Isaac very deeply, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him and love God even more. For us, the life of faith means putting God first, even before those we love (Luke 14:26; Mark 12:28-30).

III The life of faith is a life of love to others

Rahab’s kindness shows us this in two ways:-

1. HER KINDNESS – she gave hospitality to two strangers from another country (Heb.13:2). This perfectly illustrates the kindness James writes about (2:14-17).
2. HER PROTECTION – she was concerned for the safety and welfare of the spies. We too, are called upon to show pity both for the physical and the spiritual condition of others.

IV Application Ephesians 2:10

For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.



Focus Point:
James and Paul

Having completed our work on verses 14-26, we are now ready to answer those who assert that James is teaching salvation by works in contrast to Paul’s teaching of salvation through faith. So strongly have some people held this view that they have doubted that this letter by James should even be in the New Testament. We have to take this seriously because such a great Reformer as Martin Luther would not accept the authority of James.

First of all, we must note that there is no adequate historical evidence for omitting James’ letter from our Bibles. It would seem that it has always been there. Secondly, since that is so, we must be guided by Paul’s words that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). This means that as God is the author of the whole Bible, there cannot be any contradictions. God cannot contradict himself. So if there seems to be a conflict, the fault is with our poor understanding and not with the Bible. Thirdly, as we have seen in our detailed studies, when we remember to whom James is writing, and what he is teaching, we find that James and Paul are in complete harmony. Fourthly, we might even say that James gives necessary balance to the total New Testament relationship between faith and works.

Those who see a conflict between James and Paul believe that while Paul teaches that we are saved by faith without works, James is saying that we are saved by works. The truth is that both writers agree that we are saved by faith. Paul is clear about this in all his letters (note especially Eph. 2:8-9), because that is his major theme. James does not say so much about this aspect because he has another aspect he wants to stress. But he says that we receive new birth through the word of truth (1:18). This implies salvation

through faith, because it is through faith in the word that we receive life. But, more directly in 2:5, James says that it is through faith that those who love the Lord inherit the kingdom. We find the same in 2:14, where James assumes that we are saved through faith. But in harmony with the whole section, he is examining the kind of faith that saves.

Both Paul and James are also agreed that the kind of faith that saves is a faith that shows itself in a life of love to God and toward others. Paul spends 5 chapters in his letter to the Romans setting out the doctrine of justification by faith in detail and then 11 chapters on the kind of life people who have been justified by faith should live. Paul does the same in his letter to the Ephesians where after 3 chapters of teaching about salvation, he has 3 more about the kind of life that we must follow. James says exactly the same, but in a slightly different way. He says if we claim to have faith, but do not live the life that should follow, then the faith we claim to have is not faith that saves.

It is clear then that when James says that “a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (2:24), we must understand this as a very strong statement that we deceive ourselves if we claim to believe, to trust in Jesus Christ, but our lives fail to demonstrate the reality of our faith.

This is very important because there are those who teach that so long as we say we are trusting in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, it does not matter what kind of life we live. Both Paul and James would condemn such teaching.



Note

Here are two marks of a good teacher –

1. *Repetition* – James says the same thing more than once, each time in a slightly different way.
2. *Illustration* – James does not stop at a general principle, but shows what he means by clear illustration.



Over to you

If in your society people think that they can earn their place in heaven, how would you go about showing them that they are in error and in great danger?

Conversely, do you have people in your congregation who say they are Christians but do not show it in the way they live and relate to other people? If so, how will the letter written by James help you?

Write down in your own words how you would reconcile Romans 5:1 and James 2:24. Could you then explain it to a seven year old child?