

James 2:14-3:12: Faith and works; Christian speech

1. **James v. Paul:** James says that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24). Paul appears to contradict this when he says that “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16). Amazingly, both Paul and James make use of the same example, Abraham, whose “faith was credited to him as righteousness.” To be clear, Paul is not about cheap grace.¹ This conflict is resolved by recognizing that “works” in Galatians is obedience to the law, especially cultural boundary markers like circumcision, but In James, “works” refers to caring for widows and orphans (1:27); not showing favoritism (2:1), etc.—actions which might be characterized by Paul as flowing from the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).²

What are meant, for Paul and James, by Abraham’s works and faith?

2. **Friend of God:** A further clue to resolving their positions is found in James 2:23, where James’ says Abraham was “called the friend of God” (23). Abraham was “friends” with God before there was creed or law. He was in a right relationship before God because he trusted God and acted on that trust. Setting aside soteriology and focusing on your relationship with God, What would it have looked like for Abraham to exhibit the failed faith of either Paul or James? How would you paraphrase James 2:24 and Galatians 2:16 in terms of relationship with God? (*Extra credit:* for either Paul or James, is the initial choice to follow Jesus a “work”?)
3. **Mature faith:** James says Abraham’s faith was “completed” (*teleioō*—brought to maturity, perfected) by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac (2:22). This reminds us that a key way to safeguard both our faith and that of the next generation is to encourage this sort of stepping out in trust, establishing a chain of experiences in which God is present and faithful in our lives. (a) What might God be calling you to do as a step of trust? (b) How can we lead our youth and young adults in doing this, to help keep them from wandering away from the faith?
4. **Words that last:** James describes the potentially devastating and powerful effects words can have. Things people say to and about us can stay with us for a lifetime. What have been some of the most powerfully positive and negative things that have been said about you? Who in your life is close enough to you for you to affect in this way?
5. **Words that change:** James says that words not only *reveal* who we are, but they *form* who we are. They are so powerful that if you want to see victory and order in one or more area of your life (e.g. you want to master your anger, or you want to learn to better spend time with God), you should start by controlling what you say (and, 3:2, only the Spirit can do this for you). Have you experienced this? Can you think of an area in your life where you would *like* to see change which might be affected by a change in speech? (E.g., do you struggle with anger? Do you find the peace of God eludes you? Do you wish you were more consistent in devotions? &c.)

¹ Not to caricature Paul, who also said that we are “created to do **good works**” (Eph 2:10); that “the only thing that counts is faith **working** through love” (Gal 5:6); and warned of others, “they claim to know God, but **by their actions** they deny him” (Tit 1:16).

² This “works” distinction goes back at least to the 4th century and Augustine: “Paul said that a man is justified through faith without the works of the law, but not without those works of which James speaks.” The one hint James has of the sort of “works” Paul refers to is in 2:19’s subtle reference to the *Shema*, the basic creed of Judaism, which pious Jews recited twice a day. James makes it clear this is not to be confused with saving faith, since the demons themselves share this belief.

While James is often read as a series of fortune-cookie proverbs, it is actually a subtle meta-sermon on Jesus' teaching. For instance, below are Jesus' and James' teachings on speech (with James' new insights in bold):

Jesus	James
Faith and works	
<p>"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (Mt 7:24; also the parable of the two sons in Mt 21:28-32)</p>	<p>Faith without works can't save you</p> <p>Works show the state of your faith</p> <p>Abraham and Rahab are the exemplars of faith which acts</p>
The tongue	
<p>"...if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire... if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you [go be reconciled]" (Mt 5:21-26)</p> <p>"You will know [false prophets] by their fruits. Do you gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (Mt 7:16-18)</p> <p>(Luke's version makes it clear this is about speech by concluding, "it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks"; Lk 6:43-44)</p>	<p>The tongue is powerful in its effects, and both reveals and forms who you are</p> <p>Don't be inconsistent (cursing people and blessing God)</p> <p>Humans are made in God's image and should be treated accordingly</p> <p>Only a perfect person doesn't sin; don't rush to be teachers!</p>



Fun fact: James makes a pun on "work" in 2:20 by referring to work (*ergon*) as "workless" (*arge*); faith lacking works does not work!

Further fun fact: The rich, male, upstanding Abraham and the (likely) poor, immoral (being a prostitute), female Rahab form a "merismus", a pair which two extremes representing a range, like "for better and for worse, for richer or poorer".

References in James

- James 2: Faith and works
 - James 2:24: A person is justified by works and not by faith alone
 - Galatians 2:16: nevertheless knowing that a man is **not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus**, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be **justified by faith** in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since **by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified**
 - Galatians 3:6+: Even so Abraham “Believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.
 - Rom 4:2: For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God
 - Tit 1:16: They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him.

Scripture Passages on the Tongue

- Whoever speaks, do it as one who is speaking the utterances of God. 1 Peter 4:11a
- Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how to respond to each person. Colossians 4:6
- When you get together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue and interpretation. Let everything be done to build one another up. 1 Corinthians 14:26
- Proverbs:
 - 10:20 The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver, The heart of the wicked is worth little. 21 The lips of the righteous feed many, But fools die for lack of understanding.
 - 16:24 Pleasant words are a honeycomb, Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
 - 25:12 Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold Is a wise reprove to a listening ear.
 - 12:18 There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing.
 - 15:2 The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, But the mouth of fools spouts folly.
 - 15:4 A soothing tongue is a tree of life, But perversion in it crushes the spirit.
 - 18:21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit.
 - 16:23 The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, And adds persuasiveness to his lips.
- Eph. 4:29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.
- 1 Thess 5:11 Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.
- 1 Thess 5:14 And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men.

Extra questions and observations:

1. 35 years pass between “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” and when he offers Isaac as a sacrifice.
2. Note that Abraham doesn’t carry out the sacrifice! Nor is it part of God’s law, yet James is addressing legal observance.
3. James 2:24: “a person is justified by works”—“justified” is *dikaioō*, to make righteous or to regard as righteous; James is using it in a different way from the way Paul does in Romans.
 - a. Paul is addressing Jewish-Gentile friction in Rome, where Jews were trying to assert the need for cultural boundary markers via legal observance and Gentiles were looking down on the Jews as God’s failed people who were being replaced
 - b. James is addressing nominalism (i.e. “dead orthodoxy”); look at the sorts of “works” he’s referring to: not cultural boundary markers, but what Paul would call the fruit of the Spirit (1 Cor; Gal). Note that Paul says both of these are necessary and without them we are not saved!
 - c. For Paul:
 - i. “works” means deeds done to earn God’s acceptance, in place of faith in Jesus
 - ii. Question: How do I get accepted before God? Answer: Only by faith in Jesus’ work for you, not by your works for God
 - iii. True faith trusts in God’s promise rather than in human merit
 - d. for James:
 - i. “works” means actions that demonstrate a living faith, and the proper result of faith
 - ii. Q: How is it shown I have been accepted by God? A: Only by actions that demonstrate faith
 - iii. True faith reveals itself in actions that are consistent with God’s promises
4. The supreme example of Abraham was an ability to step out in faith in God’s promises and trust him, despite personal risk and sacrifice
 - a. [Gary] We should be ready to offer up unhealthy relationships; consuming hobbies; schedule sovereignty; isolation and vulnerability; the right to hate and/or reject others
 - b. [Gary] What scary steps of faith have I taken lately?
 - c. [Gary] Be willing to share your faith; help a “messy” person; confront someone in love; begin or increase financial giving; take on a new ministry role
 - d. [Gary] James is asking, has my faith in Jesus produced changes in my desires and lifestyle? Has it freed me from fear of death and/or God’s judgment?

5. The word “faith” means in James “full-orbed trust in Christ” (Blomberg, 129). Blomberg adds, “Perhaps ‘works’ (*erga*) might be better translated as ‘action’ in this context to ‘avoid confusion with Paul’s teaching [against] nomistic religion, i.e., “works of the law”’. With this in mind, James is saying, “show me your trust apart from your actions, and I by my actions will show you my trust” (19).
6. James refers to the justifying effect of an action which Abraham doesn’t actually complete

Leader's Intro:

We have seen in our three weeks so far that James is much more than the string of fortune cookies which it is often taken as. It has a complex relationship with Jesus' teaching, and especially the SOTM. Every week we have worked hard to see what's behind the bumper-sticker version of the passage and have been rewarded with a deeper understanding of both James' and Jesus' teaching. This evening we'll look at two topics.

James 2:14-26 follows naturally on the discussion of favoritism. Having said that mercy triumphs over judgment, having urged them to not show favoritism, James drives the point home by condemning any form of faith which doesn't bear fruit in actions.

In 3:1-12 the topic changes to speech. Both of tonight's topics are found in the TOC of 1:26-27:

^{1:26} If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The faith v. works discussion, we'll see, is important because it goes beyond the simple "don't just be a talker" conclusion to have implications for our relationships with God. The passage on speed has a couple of points which are crucial but often are missed, but the challenge with that passage will be our willingness to be vulnerable about our struggles. I am hoping we can do that tonight.

Notes

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I. Background

a. ...

II. Words and Phrases

a. ...

III. Themes

a. ...

IV. Observations

a. ...

V. Questions

a. ...

VI. To do

a. ...