

Faith and Works in the Church

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] He pulls the horse's reins to the left, and to the left it goes. When he sways to the right, as well as almost falling off the horse himself, he pulls the horse's reins to the right, and to the right it goes.

The drunk man riding his horse is only ever one degree from disaster, and the horse on which he's riding never goes in a straight line.

What Luther's saying is that the church swings from one extreme to the other, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left, but never in the middle.

Sometimes Christians so emphasize the sovereignty of God that they rob mankind of a God-given free will. Others so emphasize the autonomy of mankind in our decision-making that we forget that God is sovereign over all things.

The truth, of course, is in the middle. Both extremes are true. God is sovereign, and we are accountable for our actions. That's the plain teaching of Scripture.

[1 : 15] But perhaps the most obvious way in which the church lurches from one extreme to another, the most obvious way in which the church is like a drunk man on a horse, is our attitude to faith and works.

What is the basis upon which a man or woman is saved and counted righteous by God? Is it his faith in Christ, or is it his works for Christ?

Should the church preach a gospel of justification by faith alone, or a message of good works?

Should we lurch to the right or to the left?

That we are saved by faith, or we are saved by works, or by some mixture of the two, faith and works. Over the centuries, some Christian teachers have suggested that Paul swings one way, James swings the other.

That Paul, swaying to one side of the horse, teaches a gospel of salvation by faith alone, whereas James, swinging to the other side of the horse, teaches a message of salvation by works, or at the very least, faith and works.

[2 : 38] They quote James here in James 2.24, when he says, a person is justified by what he does, and not by faith alone, to suggest a sharp division between Paul and James.

Now, we cannot deny, nor should we, the differences between the ways Paul and James use words like works and faith.

But likewise, we cannot so glibly assume there is a difference in doctrine between them. But the inspired word of God contradicts itself on this primary issue of salvation by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone.

We do not dare pit Paul and James against each other, lest we lose both the integrity of Scripture and the supremacy of the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus.

James refuses to play our theological games. In James 2.1, he settles all doubt as to his view of the primary source of salvation.

[3 : 59] He writes, my brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. In other words, we are brothers, James says, because we are believers.

We are fellows, because we have faith in Christ. Likewise, Paul refuses to play our theological games. In Ephesians chapter 2, rather, verse 10, having established the primacy of salvation by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone, he writes, we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

So to ask the question, how does Paul differ from James, is to ask entirely the wrong question. To compare the two as a false comparison, you're comparing apples and pears.

both hold to the primacy of faith, whilst urging believers to express their faith in good works. And that if a professed Christian does not engage in good works, it's a sign that he has no faith. This is the course we must carefully follow. The New Testament course, the course of Jesus, swinging not to the right, nor to the left, not being that drunk man on a horse, but being sober minded, and accepting both as true.

[5 : 39] A man's exceeding need of faith, and a man's expression necessarily of his faith, in good works. Now you will know that the immediate context of James 2, 14 through 19, is that of a church, which is showing favoritism.

It's paying special attention to the rich, whilst insulting the poor. And we've seen over the last two weeks, that this despicable practice, goes against everything the gospel teaches.

A gospel which is not merely to be heard, but also to be put into practice. This is faith at work, when Christians refuse to show favoritism, but recognizing the priority of Christ's love for them, pursue the royal law, love your neighbor as yourself.

In these verses, James 2, 14 through 19, we have the first part of James's biblical argument, that genuine, saving, living, vital faith in Christ, expresses itself, in loving, and giving, and giving, and giving to its fellow Christians.

In James 2, 20 through 26, which we'll look at next week, James is going to refer to two Old Testament believers, as proof of the point, that faith without works, is no faith at all.

[7 : 11] Abraham, and Rahab. But this week, from James 2, 14 through 19, James introduces the subject, by drawing attention, not to past history, but to the present practice, in the early churches, to which he is writing.

And he wants to talk about two things. First of all, a saving faith gives, and secondly, a living faith shows.

A saving faith gives, and a living faith shows. First of all, a saving faith gives. A saving faith gives. James begins his argument in verse 14, and we must also. He says, What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith, but has no deeds?

Can such faith save him? He begins with a very powerful question, which draws us into the very heart of the matter. Here's a man who claims to be a Christian, to have a living faith in Christ.

[8 : 24] Perhaps he talks a good talk. Perhaps he sports a good look. Perhaps he's one of the rich in the church, or at least one of those who toady up to the rich, and fawn over them.

He speaks often about being a believer, in the Lord Jesus Christ. But this man has an outstanding problem. He has no deeds with which to back up his claim.

His words and his life, send out contradictory messages, and say the very opposite thing. His words say that when a stranger, Christ, loved him, his actions say that he loves no one but himself, or those who are like him.

James, you know, often uses this method of argumentation in his letters, arguing against an imaginary figure who holds certain views which are anti-gospel.

St. Anselmo, as we'll see in a few weeks' time, follows the same method of argument in his wonderful book, *Curdeus Homo, Why Did God Become a Man?* The Marrow of Modern Divinity, perhaps the singularly most important book in Scottish historical theology, follows in the same path by casting true gospel living against characters who represent legalism on one hand and antinomianism on the other.

[9 : 58] James wants us to picture in our minds someone who says, I have faith in Jesus Christ, but whose works do not back up his words.

Here's a man who says he has been forgiven of his sin, but he refuses to forgive others. Here's a man who says that he has been blessed by Christ, but he does not bless others, and so on and so forth.

And James says of this man, standing so proudly and talking so loudly, can such faith save him? Can such faith save him?

He clearly expects his readers to answer in the negative. Well, no, of course. Such faith cannot save him. What James is talking about, therefore, if we want to put it into words that we can understand, is the nature of saving faith.

In what does saving faith consist? Does this man who claims to have faith but does not walk the talk have genuine saving faith?

[11 : 10] Or is the faith he professes to have less than saving? What does it look like to have saving faith in Christ, that genuine faith in Jesus and his gospel which brings us to salvation?

James answers by drawing us a word picture of a situation which was very common in the early church, but which is worryingly all too familiar in our own church, but perhaps is also complicated by the virtue of our robust security system here in the United Kingdom.

He says, suppose a brother or sister is without clothes or daily food. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes or daily food.

Now, there are many in that situation. Fellow Christians, to use James' terminology, without. The have-nots of the church. It may not be food or clothing they lack, although it may be.

Their withoutness may demonstrate itself in many different ways. Social isolation, mental illness, substance abuse, to name but three.

[12 : 28] But whatever it is they are without, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, our fellow believers, saved by grace and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's be clear, dear brothers and sisters in Glasgow City Free Church. We have people like this among us. We have fellow Christians with great needs.

God has equipped us to meet. We don't have to go to the third world to find Christians who are struggling to make ends meet. To have another Christian speak to us in our loneliness.

To sit with someone and assure them that though their mind isn't working right, they remain dearly loved by God. To have someone commit to leading us out of the horror of addiction.

Yes, it might take a little bit of adjacent thinking, but we really do have people like this in Glasgow City Free Church, and perhaps they aren't the kind of people we might expect them to be.

[13 : 40] A brother or sister without. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we have been made aware of their need, but our response is, in the words of James, well go.

I wish you well. Keep warm and well fed. And we proceed to do nothing for them or to give them anything. We who pray every day for our daily bread in the Lord's Prayer do not give them of our bread to eat.

We offer warm sentiments but give nothing away. And clearly James here is suggesting it's within our power to feed them and clothe them, but we choose not to.

Rather just to say nice things and to wait for someone else to do what we ourselves should have done for them. That's the plain meaning of the text in its original form.

That first, this poor person is a believer and his need is known to the church. That second, the church, while saying nice things to him, gives nothing away.

[14 : 55] And third, the church sends that poor person away expecting someone else to feed them and clothe them. And James says to this church, what good is that?

What good is that? Is the faith of the church really saving faith if it can send this man away with nothing?

Jesus himself said, freely you have received, freely give. So how can it be said that these Christians have received anything from God if they are not willing to give?

That's the issue that James is exploring here. The nature of saving faith. An empty hand into which God has poured out his grace but is then unwilling to give grace to another hand which is also empty, has never received grace in the first place.

When we were lonely, God said to us, I will be with you always. If we are content to leave our fellow Christians lonely, what does that say about how genuinely we believe what God said to us?

[16 : 22] When we were guilty, God said, I forgive you. If we are content to withhold forgiveness from fellow Christians, what does that say about how genuine our forgiveness from God is?

When we were under the bondage of our sin, God said, I will set you free. If we are content to leave fellow Christians struggling alone with their addictions, what does that say about how genuine our liberation from sin really is?

For all its fine-sounding words, the faith, this person who claims to have faith but has no deeds, this is not genuine faith.

Genuine saving faith. It never was. He's got some kind of faith. But it's not a genuine faith in the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ because if it was, his heart would be drawn out to meet the needs of his poor Christian brother or sister when she's hungry and he's naked.

What then is the answer to this man? If this man came to us for advice, what would we say to him? This man who is all talk and no work.

[17 : 58] Well, the easy answer would be to say to him, you need to put your faith into practice and get your checkbook out. But easy isn't right.

the main problem this man has isn't what he does or does not do. It's that he does not possess genuine saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Because if he did, he would express it in good works like feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and caring for the sick and sitting with the lonely and loving the addict. What this man needs to do is to get back to basics and get his faith right.

He needs to ensure that he is genuinely saving faith for it's then and only then when his heart and his mind have been transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ he'll become a giver.

That's how we sit straight on the horse and control the direction of our lives as Christians. ensuring that we have saving faith in Jesus Christ evidenced in good works to others.

[19 : 12] Listen carefully to what I say. Saving faith which freely takes grace from God will freely give grace to others.

Saving faith which freely gives grace which freely takes grace from God rather will freely give grace to others. The cross where we are all takers from Christ becomes the vehicle to become givers to Christ's people.

people. But all this man claims to have faith if there's no deeds it's not saving faith he has and he needs to question himself because a saving faith gives.

But then secondly and more briefly a living faith shows a living faith shows. This is the second part of James' argument from verse 17 through 19 and it concerns a man who claims that he does not need good works in order to be a Christian.

He does not dispute that James is a Christian but he says I'm of a different sort from you. Again this imaginary figure against whom James is arguing says to him well you have faith I have deeds.

[20 : 45] Is this man right? Is it possible that there are two types of Christians those who are justified by faith in Christ and those who are justified by works for Christ.

Those who believe and those who do. In this section from verse 17 through 19 James is using the language of saving faith but of living faith by contrast to faith without works which he says in verse 17 is dead.

And James is saying here there is only one kind of living faith only one a faith which shows itself in good works.

He says there are not two kinds of Christians those with faith and no deeds and those with no faith but plenty of deeds.

There's only one kind of Christian the man or woman whose faith shows itself by works. James says to his imaginary opponent he says well show me your faith without deeds and I'll show you my faith by what I do.

[22 : 07] We tend not to like showy people the kind of people who have big mouths and flaunt their achievements to make themselves look big but James is telling us that as Christians we are to be showy people but not in the way that we think of showy rather our words are to be our works.

to show that we have a living faith in Jesus Christ by what we do. Clothing the needy feeding the hungry controlling our tongues caring for the vulnerable etc.

The man who talks a big faith but does not care whether other Christians live or die for all that he might sound good he does not have a living faith in Jesus Christ what faith he has is dead it's not alive it's not a real living saving genuine faith whatever he might say to the contrary because if he did have a living growing faith in Jesus it would inevitably unnecessarily express itself in good works after all remember how Jesus who more than anyone else in scripture prioritized faith over works said to his disciples by their fruits you will know them and also not everyone who says to me Lord Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven it is not no never that

James is saying that a living saving faith is not sufficient for salvation he's not saying that that's the mistake critical scholars make rather James is saying a living saving faith will inevitably it must result in good works and if there is no good works it's a sign that whatever kind of faith it is a person may have it's not true Christian faith it's not living and saving I do hope you get the distinction because it's of the utmost importance for our understanding of James what lies at the root of those of the problems of those to whom James sent this letter was not their bad behavior but their bad belief their faith was wrong what lies at the root of the problems of those to whom

James sent this letter the early church showing all its favoritism was not their bad behavior it was their bad belief the faith they had was wrong you say to me but I believe orthodox doctrine what more do you want me to believe than that is this not of the nature of a living saving faith that I believe the right things James says to you well you believe that there is one God that's good even the demons believe that and shudder the traditional Jewish statement of faith the so called Shema hear oh Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one is taken from Deuteronomy chapter 6 and verse 1 that's great but even the demons know there is only one God and

[26 : 01] James is saying here intellectual knowledge of the truth is not sufficient it is not enough to believe the right things about God because even the demons do that the devil is a PhD theologian he could write a deeper and more truthful systematic theology than any textbook you could ever find in the bookstore a living saving faith in Jesus Christ is more than just believing the right things about God because even the demons of hell do that the demons of hell do cheap grace but being a Christian is a matter merely of saying the right words and believing the right things intellectually a living faith in Jesus is more than just believing the right things about God it's about our response to what we know the demons believe these things but recoil from them they tremble at the knowledge of the glory of

God and the power of the gospel they shudder at the remembrance of the crushing defeat they suffered at Calvary and under no circumstances will the demons ever repent of their sins but what makes what we know a living faith is that on the basis of all we know about God however many questions we may have rather than running from him we run toward him rather than loathing him we love him rather than shaking our fists at him we bow our knees before him we accept his gracious salvation of us through Christ Jesus and increasingly conform to his giving loving image what we know about the love of Jesus melts our hearts with love for him and for others a love which naturally finds expression in good works if there are no good works it's a sign that the love of Christ has no place in our hearts and that our faith is not living it is the dead faith of demons indeed Martin Luther could not have been more correct in his observation that the church is like a drunk man riding on a horse swaying between salvation by faith and salvation by works the truth is as we see from Jesus from James from Paul and from everywhere else in scripture a living faith in Jesus will necessarily express itself in good works works of grace mercy and love emanating from a heart of a Christian who himself is the recipient of the grace mercy and love of God so by way of a last word what is my advice to all of us from this passage what's my advice to us all it's just too easy and frankly exegetically lazy to apply

James teaching here and guilt us into doing more for the poor among us in whatever way that poverty manifests itself rather my advice is this ensure that the faith you have is both living and saving in this first that your faith is firmly grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ in which God shows his mercy and gives you salvation and then secondly expressing that living saving faith naturally and practically in good works let us pray this surely oh Lord is a vexed subject to many Christians that of the seeming distinction between Paul and James in the matter of salvation by faith salvation by works but we thank you that friends need no reconciliation there are differences between the two Lord we ask and pray that you would help us to have that genuine living saving faith by once again looking to the cross of Jesus and seeing there the love the mercy and the grace of our Lord and loving heavenly father be with us then oh Lord as we apply that faith this week in loving the lonely in loving the sick in loving the addict and all those who are without in Jesus name we pray these things Amen