

Faith Sacrifices

Lesson for Sunday, November 12, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

- ⇒ This is our third lesson in this brief text nestled in James 2.
- ⇒ Last week we went all the way back to Genesis 22 for one main reason: context.
- ⇒ Context is critical to correctly interpreting these verses. This becomes evident when we read these two verses side by side:
 - James 2:24 – “By works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”
 - Romans 3:28 – “Man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”
- ⇒ Paul and James are both writing about the exact same Gospel; yet they are writing from two different vantage points, and they are addressing two different problems.
 - Paul is fighting against the false idea that we can earn our salvation.
 - James is fighting against an easy believism that reduces salvation to intellectual belief.
- ⇒ What is interesting (and obviously inspired by the Holy Spirit) is that both Paul and James use Abraham as an example of what they are trying to prove.
 - The difference? James is referring to Abraham in Genesis 22 (last week’s lesson) and Paul is referring to Abraham in Genesis 15.
 - By keeping these two texts in mind, we can properly interpret James 2:20-24.

BIBLE STUDY:

1. Two Pictures of **Faith** (vs. 20).
 - a. If you remember in verses 14-19, James is not contrasting mature faith with immature. Instead, he is comparing genuine faith with no faith at all (even though it may be professed). In verse 20, James presents two pictures of the word “faith.”
 - b. The first is a **dead** faith which does not save.
 - i. Remember what James said in earlier verses. If one professes to have faith, but has no works to support it (as in ignoring the needy), he actually has no faith at all.
 - ii. James refers to him as a “vain man!” The word “vain” means empty. James is saying that the person may claim to have faith, but the reality is that person has nothing – it is an empty profession.
 - c. The second picture is a **living** faith which does save.
 - i. Every other mention of faith in James refers to a living faith (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5).
 - ii. But in 2:14-24, James introduces imaginary people who claim to have faith without deeds, and James says over and over again that such people don’t really have faith.
 - d. Thought: Is your faith living or dead?
2. Two Pictures of **Righteousness** (vs. 21)
 - a. It is important to recognize that the word “righteousness” is used in various ways throughout Scripture. Two of those ways are relevant to this text, and we also see both in Paul’s writings.
 - b. First is **positional** righteousness.
 - i. This refers to how we **stand** before God.
 - ii. We become positionally righteous at the moment of our salvation (see 2 Corinthians 5:21).
 - iii. God clothes you in Christ’s righteousness and you are positionally right before God.
 - c. Second is **practical** righteousness.
 - i. This refers to how we **live** before God.
 - ii. We demonstrate and grow in righteousness in the way we live.
 - d. So at times in the Bible, righteousness refers to how we stand before God, and at other times it refers to how we live before God.

3. Two Pictures of **Works** (vs. 22-24)
- a. The Greek word for “works” is *ergon* and is translated works/actions/deeds. As you study the Bible you will see that sometimes works are used in a positive way, and sometimes in a negative way.
 - b. Negative: Works fueled by the **flesh** do not honor God.
 - i. This is often how Paul refers to works (example: Galatians and Romans 3:28).
 - ii. These are works that are done in order to win God’s favor.
 - c. Positive: Works that are the fruit of **faith** do honor God.
 - i. This is often how James uses works.
 - ii. He refers to works 15 times and all are positive uses of the word.
 - iii. He is referring to our obedience. (Paul also does this at times such as in Romans 1:5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:11; Gal. 5:6.)
 - d. Here’s where our context becomes relevant: How does Abraham come into play? According to both James & Paul, genuine faith produces works.
 - i. In verse 23, James quotes from Genesis 15. Notice that there is a progression in the life of Abraham.
 - ii. In Genesis 15:1-6, God gave Abraham His promise, and Abraham believed God. Abraham’s faith in God credited to him as righteousness.
 - iii. In Genesis 22 God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, which Abraham obeyed and was ready to do just that!
 - iv. In Abraham’s obedience (works) his faith was proven.
 - e. So when did Abraham believe God? In Genesis 22? No. Some say there were up to 30 years between Genesis 15 & 22.
 - f. Abraham’s faith resulted in works of obedience when God called him to sacrifice Isaac.

SUMMARY:

- ⇒ From this study we are reminded of two essential truths of the Christian life:
 - First, salvation is by grace through faith alone. At the moment we place our faith in Christ we are made right before God.
 - Second, genuine faith works. Genuine conversion will result in obedience as we trust God in our daily lives.
- ⇒ Teacher: This is a chance to challenge your class members to consider their own salvation. We are not in the business of causing people to doubt their salvation. But an empty profession is something we must each confront.
- ⇒ All that James is saying in this text is that we are not justified by faith that claims to believe in Jesus but does nothing. That kind of faith is not different from demons’ belief.
- ⇒ And to that, Paul would say, “Amen.”