

Justification by faith only?

• The translation of 2:4

• The definite article with abstract nouns

• James does not refer to two kinds of faith

• We are justified (in Paul's use of the term) without works

• Shocking – but true – salvation is a gift of God

• Paul going back to Genesis, Isaiah and Jeremiah put it in the clearest and fullest manner

2:4 interpreted ...

(i) To deny that faith in Jesus is the exclusive way of salvation

'What is the profit to anyone else, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but he does not have works; faith cannot save anyone, can it?' James 2:14 is much loved by those who wish to deny the biblical teaching of 'justification by faith-only'. For James says: *me dunatai he pistis sosai auton?* – 'faith cannot save him, can it?'

It will not help us to translate 'Can **that** faith save us . . . ?', as if James were speaking of two kinds of faith. The Greek word for faith generally has the word 'the' in front of it, but that does not mean we must translate it 'the faith' or 'that faith' in English. In Greek words like 'faith' tend to have 'the' in front of them where in English we would use the word 'faith' on its own. (In technical language: abstract nouns in Greek take the definite article more frequently than in English.) Faith is mentioned fifteen times in James, ten times with 'the'¹ and five times without². There is no discussion of two kinds of faith and *he pistis* is generally to be translated 'faith' not '**that** faith'. When James speaks of 'the testing of your faith'³ the Greek has *he pistis*. In James 2:22 the faith of Abraham uses the same words (*he pistis*) that are found in James 2:14. We cannot dodge a difficulty by translating 'Can that faith save us ...?' James does not refer to two kinds of faith. (But, as James will say, there are two kinds of justification.)

We are initially declared righteous in the eyes of God, being totally and eternally accepted by God, only through our trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, and without any reference at all to anything good that we might have ever done. We are 'declared righteous' and made permanently right in God's eyes, as if we had never sinned, simply by trusting Jesus. We are 'reckoned righteous' in God's eyes. Jesus' righteousness is 'imputed' or 'reckoned' to be ours. 'To the one who does not do anything,' said Paul, 'but believes upon the one who justifies the ungodly, that person's faith is reckoned as righteousness'¹. The person is ungodly, does not do anything, believes, and he or she is right with God! We are justified (in Paul's use of the term) without works.

But this shocks us! How can we be accepted by God entirely upon the basis of grace. And James 2:14 is often brought in at this point. 'Surely faith without works cannot be enough for us to be accepted by God' it is said. But Paul's teaching (for it is Paul who puts it in the clearest and fullest manner) goes back to Genesis 15:6, and Isaiah and Jeremiah have the same teaching exactly. 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God. It is not of works, lest anyone should boast'¹.

Let me list some of the ways in which James 2:14 has been interpreted.

(i) As I say, some use it to try to overthrow the Bible's teaching that faith in Jesus is the exclusive way of salvation. The biblical

¹ 1:3; 2:1, 14, 17, 18, 18, 20, 22, 26; 5:15
² 1:6; 2:5, 14, 18, 24
³ 1:3

¹ Romans 4:5

¹ Ephesians 2:9

teaching is: we are **initially** 'justified', given a right status with God, exclusively by our faith. Our first acceptance by God has nothing to do with 'anything we have done either good or bad' (using Paul's language in Romans 9:11). Some want to use James 2:14 to overthrow this teaching. However we shall discover that James is using language in a different way and speaking about a different topic.

(ii) *To convict the unsaved person*

• *An 'out-of-context' interpretation*

• *Pretend Christians have to be helped – of course*

• *What is wrong with the 'pretend-Christian' is not his lack of good works ...but his lack of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*

• *Not a serious approach just like the Pharisee of Luke 18:10-14*

• *Continued in part 13*

(ii) Some want to use James 2:14 to make us doubt or suspect our salvation. They want to use James 2:14 to convict the unsaved person. The difficulty with this is that it is an 'out of context' interpretation. James has no doubts of the **initial**-salvation of his people. He has no doubts of the status of his people as the people of God. Even in this very verse he calls them 'my brothers and sisters'. Of course 'pretend-Christians' have to be helped to come to salvation. I do not deny that. But it is not what James is dealing with here. 'Pretend-Christians' and inconsistent Christians are different cases. A 'pretend-Christian' might be quite a good person, and might be full of good works to the poor! A true Christian might be inconsistent (as James' friends were inconsistent). At this point the 'pretend-Christians' might be producing more good works than the true Christian! What is wrong with the 'pretend-Christian' is not his lack of good works towards the poor but his lack of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ¹. To think James 2:14 is designed to make us doubt our basic status as God's people is to miss James' point altogether.

¹ as 2:1 says

In any case, what if a Christian takes up this line of thought seriously? He says to himself: 'I do not think I am producing enough good works. I think that perhaps I am not "saved" at all.' What then does he do? He tries to 'get saved' again. 'Lord, please **truly** save me,' he prays. 'I have been trusting Jesus, I thought, but now I am not sure. Lord Jesus Christ I ask You to be my Saviour. This time (for last time I said this it seems it did not work!) I will try to produce some good works to show that I am **really** saved . . . !' What sort of praying is this? This is like the Pharisee of Luke 18:10–14!

None of this is getting to grips with James 2:14 in its context. We must follow the text more closely.

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