

'Justification by works' – as James uses these words

1. Different uses of the word 'justification'

2. It is the reward for persistent obedience

3. It was the time when Abraham inherited the promises of God

4. It was the time when Abraham 'entered into rest'

5. It is a spiritual 'experience'

6. It is reached by persistent works of faith

7. The fulfilment of salvation – being approved by God

Let us consider again what James calls 'justification by works'.

1. **What James means by 'justification' is quite different from what Paul means by 'justification'**. As we have seen 'justification by works' is receiving the approval of God after we have been serving Him believingly, as happened to Abraham in the events recorded in Genesis 22. Paul and James use the word 'justification' in different ways. For James it is reaching the point where God says 'I know that you fear Me . . . I will indeed bless you.'

2. **It is the reward for persistent obedience**. Abraham had persevered in obedient faith (most of the time!) for many years. Then God gave him one last test^{☞1} and Abraham demonstrated his utter obedience to God and God 'justified' him – He spoke of His approval of Abraham and His determination to bless him.

3. **It was the time when Abraham inherited the promises of God**. Many years before God had given Abraham promises concerning his life and how God would use Abraham in the forwarding of His kingdom. The promises all revolved around Isaac. Genesis 22 was the point in Abraham's life where these promises were 'inherited'. From that point on they could not be lost.

4. **It was the time when Abraham 'entered into rest'**. This is not the occasion for me to expound Hebrews, but as I understand the matter Abraham 'entered into rest' at the point where he received God's approval in a greater way than ever and God took an oath concerning the blessing that was to come to Abraham and his line. From that point on Abraham could not lose the promise. He had 'entered into rest'.

5. **It is a spiritual 'experience'**. 'Justification' in Paul's sense of the term is not strictly an 'experience'. It does not take place in our hearts; it takes place in the courts of God's judgement. But James' 'justification by works' is an experience. It is God's saying something to us. It is consciously receiving God's approval. It is receiving a direct witness of the Spirit. God spoke to Abraham, not simply to Himself, when He said 'I will indeed bless you.' Abraham must have entered into great joy.

6. **It is reached by persistent works of faith**. James says, 'You see that faith was working together with his works...^{☞1}. God asks us to do things for Him that require faith. There may be delay and opposition and a great sense of weakness. But we go on working for God out of our faith in His promises and we achieve something for God. Eventually God lets us know that He is pleased with us. We are justified – vindicated, declared to be pleasing to God – by our persistent works of faith.

7. **This experience of being approved by God is the fulfilment of our salvation**. 'You see that faith was working together with his works and by works faith was perfect^{☞1}. And the scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness". And he was called the friend of God^{☞2}. This is what Abraham was saved for. When we first trust God and His Saviour we are immediately clothed with righteousness. But God hopes to bring us to a high level of obedience and maturity. When God has brought us to the point where He is pleased with us, this 'completes' the process that started with our first salvation. The sentence of initial justification is **fulfilled** in a

☞1 Genesis 22:1

☞1 2:22

☞1 2:22

☞2 2:23

James purpose for writing

• He is writing to 'respectable backsliders' who want to live a life of comfort, ease and luxury, with little concern for any needy people

• There is nothing wrong with wealth in itself

• Yet the very heart of the gospel is found in James 2

• We have to learn how to reach the poor – it is not easy

• But we have to learn how to do it

later word of divine testimony saying that God approves of us. We have (in this 'justification') reached the point which was the goal of our salvation all along. Justification by works (as James would say) is the fulfillment of what Paul would call justification only-by-faith. It is this that James has in mind when he comes to a conclusion: 'You see that a person is justified by works, and not only by faith' ^{James 2:24}.

We must remember why James is saying all of this. He is writing to 'respectable backsliders' who want to live a life of comfort and ease and luxury, with little concern for any needy people. Many modern Christians surely need James' word to them. So many of us are concerned about houses, and smart, clean, well-educated children, successful businesses, and miracles of health and wealth. But the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has rather different concerns! To consider much of Christian life today one would think that the main concern of the Christian gospel is to make life comfortable. But James' view is very different.

There is of course nothing wrong with wealth in itself. The Bible is only concerned with how it was obtained and what is done with it. Yet the very heart of the gospel is found in James 2 as well as in John 3:16. It is the great glory of the Christian church that it has always been concerned with hospitals, with ministry to the poor, with education, with justice and equality for the underprivileged, with equal opportunities for every kind of person. God gives wealth to some that they might minister to the needs of others. We are to have no favouritism towards important people, and we are to go after those who have no gold rings on their fingers and no fine clothes. God has chosen those who are poor to become rich in faith. If God has chosen such people, so must we choose them. But the respectable backslider dishonours the poor or at best treats him patronizingly.

We have a lot of work to do to catch up. Reaching the poor with the gospel is not easy. The poor have some sinners among them as well and know how to tell stories to their own advantage! We are not to be gullible. In my experience reaching the poor takes a lot of experience before we learn to avoid some big mistakes. Being patronizing is useless. Handing out money is useless. Even giving out goodies (which the poor know how to re-sell) does not always work. But we have to learn how to do it. We begin when we know our needy friends so well that they cannot deceive us. We build good relationships with them until we cannot be deceived by crooks and deceivers. Then indeed we are ready to serve God and hear Him say 'Well done.' Our faith and our works together will bring us great reward.

James 2:24



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