

Place: Lurgan Baptist 29:2:2004

Reading: James 2:14-26

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

18. WILL YOUR FAITH GET YOU TO HEAVEN ?

A cartoon appeared in The New Yorker that showed a large sign outside a church. The sign read, “ *The Lite Church, 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5% tithe, fifteen minute sermons, forty five minute worship services. We have only eight commandments your choice. We use just three spiritual laws. Everything you have wanted in a church and less.* ” Unfortunately that cartoon paints an accurate picture. Many professing Christians today are looking for a “ *lite church,*” a “ *lite commitment,*” a “ *lite doctrine,*” and a “ *lite faith.*” In the passage that we have been studying, James is asking each of us a question, “ *Is your faith genuine ? Will your faith get you to heaven ?* ” A pastor was once asked what he thought about Antinomianism, it simply means living as you please. This man was asked if he conceived it to be possible for a believer to live an ungodly life. He said “ *Sir if I pour boiling water into a cup, it makes the outside hot as well as the inside, so when the gospel gets into a man’s heart, the life will soon show that it is there.* ”

Now is this not the theme resonating throughout James’s letter ? Genuine faith produces genuine results. You see, James is saying that there is faith unto salvation, and a faith which is not unto salvation, a faith which is genuine and a faith which is false, a faith that issues in works of love, and a faith which is no better than the faith of demons. (2:19) My which kind of faith do you possess ? Saving faith or spurious faith ? Will your faith get you to heaven ? Now keep in mind James is not challenging the man who claims to be saved *because* of his works, he is challenging the man who claims to be saved in spite of the fact that he has no good works to back up his claim. In order to illustrate his point that a faith of words without works cannot save he introduces us to two well Bible characters, Abraham and Rahab and so I want to speak to you first of all about:

(1) THE PEOPLE WITH SAVING FAITH

While he was being robbed in the city of Philadelphia, an American preacher told the burglar, “ *I’m a Baptist minister.* ” His assailant replied, “ *Really ? I’m a Baptist too.* ” You see, you could be a Baptist or indeed anything else but that’s no proof that you have saving faith. Now look at these two people. Abraham and Rahab. One was a man, the other a woman. Abraham was a Jew, Rahab was a Gentile. Abraham was a godly man, Rahab was a sinful prostitute. Abraham was the friend of God, while Rahab belonged to the enemies of God. One was a patriarch, the other was a prostitute. What did they have in common ? Both exercised saving faith in the Lord. Maybe James brings these two contrasting characters together to show us that the rule is the same for us all.

No fruit in the life is a sign of no root in the heart. Now James speaks first of all about:

(a) A FAITHFUL PATRIARCH:

Abraham. Look at (2:24) Now is there a discrepancy here between the theology of James and the theology of Paul ? Is James really saying that Abraham's justification, his standing with God was the result of his works, his willingness to offer up Isaac ? I don't think so. In order to come to grips with this question let me say several things about Abraham's justification. Notice:

1. The MOMENT of Abraham's Justification:

When was Abraham justified ? Well, look at (2:23) Now that is a direct quote from (Gen 15:6) You see, Abraham's salvation experience is recorded in (Gen Ch 15) thirty years *before* this incident on Mount Moriah, 30 years *before* he offered up Isaac. God came to Abraham and told him he would have a son, that his seed would be as the stars in the heaven. Do you recall Abraham's response ? “ *And he believed in the Lord and He counted it to Him for righteousness.* ” (Gen 15:6) Paul says exactly the same thing in (Rom 4:3) “ *Abraham believed God and it was counted unto Him for righteousness.* ” Now that word “ *counted,* ” is a legal or financial term, it means “ *to put to one's account.* ” Abraham's spiritual bankbook was empty, he was bankrupt, but he trusted God and God put righteous on Abraham's account. Now he didn't work for this righteousness, he received it as gift from God. He was justified by faith. *Justification is that act of God in which He declares righteous the sinner who believes on Christ.* It is not a process it is an act. It is not something the sinner does, it is something God does for the winner when he trusts Christ. It is a once and for all event and it never changes. My how do you stand before God ? Do you stand n the right before a Holy God ? Has righteousness, Christ's righteousness been put down to your account ? Have you trusted Christ and Christ alone for salvation ? (1)

2. The MARK of Abraham's Justification:

People who say that James contradicts Paul say that because they fail to see that James was not referring here to (Gen Ch 15), the moment Abraham exercised faith in God, but rather to (Gen Ch 22) the moment Abraham offered up Isaac. You see, the offering up of Isaac was not the moment of Abraham's justification, nor was it the means of Abraham's justification, but it was the mark of Abraham's justification. The Amplified Bible put it like this, “ *Was not Abraham our father shown to be justified by his works.* ” In the words of Matthew Poole, “ *Abraham's justification was not the absolution of a sinner, but the approbation of a believer.* ” You see, the offering up of Isaac was the proof, the evidence, the sign that the faith he had exercised in (Gen Ch 15) was real, saving faith.

Do you see what (2:22) says ? “ *Surely you can see that faith was at work in his actions, and by works was faith made perfect.* ” The word “ *perfect,* ” is interesting. The same word is used in (2 Cor 12:9) where the Lord says to Paul, “ *My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.* ” What happened was that God's strength was revealed in Paul's weakness. And Abraham's faith was revealed by his works. His faith was shown to be real by his works. As

someone has expressed it, “ *Abraham was not saved by faith plus works but by a faith that works.* ”

But the question remains how was Abraham “ *justified by works ?* ” (2:21) when he had already been

“ *justified by faith.* ” Well, *by faith he was justified before God and his righteousness declared, by works he was justified before men and his righteousness demonstrated.* Now it is true that no humans actually saw Abraham put his son on the altar, but the inspired record in (Gen Ch 22) enables us to see the event and witness Abraham’s faith demonstrated by his works.

D.L. Moody used to say, “ *Every Bible should be bound in shoe leather.* ” Now he did not say that because he had been a successful shoe salesman, he said it because he was a dedicated Christian. You see, dynamic faith obeys God and reveals itself in daily life and works. My Have you a faith like Abraham’s ? Is it alive ? Is it active ? Is it operative ? Is it a faith that works ? 1:2:

3. The MEANING of Abraham’s Justification:

“ And he was called the Friend of God,” (2:23) Jehoshaphat speaks to God of “ *Abraham Thy friend,* ”

(2 Chron 20:7) and the Lord also refers to “ *Abraham My friend.* ” (Is 41:8) Is that not an amazing

statement ? Faith introduces the sinner to the Saviour and gives him the privilege of being God’s friend. We usually think the other way round. “ *What a friend we have in Jesus,* ” “ *Thou art the sinners friend.* ” But the emphasis here is that we are His friends. Do you recall what the Saviour said to His disciples ? “ *Henceforth I call you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth, but I have called you friends, for all thing that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.* ” (Jn 15:15) My what a wonderful privilege that we can share our secrets, problems, burdens needs with Him, for He is our friend, but is it not even more wonderful that He is willing to share His secrets, desires and designs with us for we are His friends. Now remember we are talking here about the people with saving faith and we have noted (a) but now we have

(b) A FORMER PROSTITUTE:

Rahab. Do you see here:

1. Her CONDITION:

She is described here and in (Heb Ch 11) as a harlot.

The word means “ *a prostitute.* ” Probably Rahab was a temple prostitute, involved in the vile Canaanite religion which raised immorality to an act of worship. Doesn’t the grace of God work in unusual places and in unexpected people ? Is it not remarkable how God in His grace uses people we think could never become His servants ? (1 Cor 1:27) Look at:

2. Her CONFESSION:

You see, Rahab had become a believer. We are not told how or when but her personal testimony is found in

(Joshua Ch 2) She said this, “ *I know that the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and in earth beneath.*” Incidentally, her confession was very similar to the confession that James quotes in (2:19) You see, the argument may run like this, “ *You know, Rahab was a believer, in fact her confession was very similar to yours, but was it her confession that proved that she was saved ?*” No, it was not. My if all we had was a confession of faith from Rahab she would never have appeared in the heroes of faith in (Heb Ch 11) You see, it was not her confession but rather:

3. Her CONFIRMATION:

That proved the reality of her faith. Rahab not only said she believed, she showed it. Do you see (2:25) ? The Amplified puts it like this, “ *Was she not shown to be justified by good deeds when she took in the scouts and got them away by a different route.*” The confirmation of her faith was so simple, she put her own life in jeopardy in order to save the lives of two-fellow believers. A woman who had ruined her life by lust at its lowest, now revealed her faith by love at its highest. There were works in her life that proved the reality of her faith ! Now here are (1)

(2) THE PROOFS OF SAVING FAITH

For in these two people that James brings before us here, he gives us two proofs, marks if you like of saving faith. He talks about:

(a) OBEDIENCE: As seen in the Life of Abraham:

Lets go back to (Gen Ch 22) Now keep in mind that God did not test Abraham to see if he was a believer but rather to show the validity of his faith. That word, “ *test,*” in (22:1) means that God intensely tested Abraham. This was to be a test like no other. I wonder have you come through such an experience recently ? Is the Lord intensely testing you in these days ? Then please remember that God not only plans the Length of your tests, but He plans their Depth as well, and He knows just how much you can endure. (Ps 103:14) What a test this was. (22:2) You see, the crucial question was this. Did Isaac or God hold the pre-eminent place in Abraham’s heart ? Do you see how Abraham responded ?

1. Abraham Obeyed IMMEDIATELY:

Did you notice it ? “ *Abraham rose up early in the morning,*” (Gen 22:3) No procrastinating, no delays.

His obedience was immediate. How immediate are your responses to the Lord ? Do you sometimes find yourself stalling with that old standby, “ *I’ll do it in a little while.*” Do you know what one of Satan’s most successful strategies is ? Getting us to drag our feet when we have a clear command from God. You see, we have a clear command from God to meet around us this Table ! (1 Cor 11:24) We have a clear command from God to be baptised. Do you recall what

Peter said in the household of Cornelius after they trusted the Lord !

“ *And Peter commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord.* ” (Acts 10:48) What have you done with the Lord’s commands ?

2. Abraham Obeyed BELIEVINGLY:

That’s an amazing statement in (22:5) Think of it. With the mountain of sacrifice looming in the distance, Abraham was able to focus on worshipping the Lord and trusting in His ability to raise the dead, if it came to that. (Heb 11:19) Someone has said that “ *faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible, and receives the impossible.* ” Abraham certainly believed that impossibilities are God’s speciality. Do you ? 1: 2:

3. Abraham Obeyed COMPLETELY:

Did you notice how meticulous he was in all of the preparations ? He “ *saddled his ass, clave the wood, built an altar, bound Isaac his son, took the knife to slay his son.* ” His obedience did not shrink from one single detail. And God rewarded him, “ *Abraham now I know that thou fearest God.* ” (22:12) Was this not what James was referring to when he said, “ *Was not Abraham our father justified by works ?* ” In other words did he not prove the reality of his faith “ when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar.” (2:21) **Obedience.** Is your faith real ? Is your life marked by obedience ? Is God challenging you the way he challenged Abraham ? Is He saying to you, “ *Who comes first ?* ” Here is the proof of saving faith (a) and then:

(b) COURAGE: As seen in the Life of Rahab:

Look at (2:25) Here was a woman who proved the reality of her faith by an act of courage. Rahab not only said she believed in God she showed it. She took her life in her hands when she welcomed the spies, and hid them, but that in itself was the evidence of her faith in the Lord. For true saving faith cannot be hidden for long. She demonstrated the reality of her faith by her works. **Courage !** Young folk when the world wants you to have its standards, accept its beliefs, visit its places, go by its morals, how do you respond ?

(Dan 1:8) In that University lecture room when that Professor starts to undermine the Word of God, how do you respond ? When some of your peers say, “ Come on, its just a little drink, its just a few drugs, its just a dance, don’t be too narrow, how do you respond ? (1) (2)

(3) THE PRINCIPLE ABOUT SAVING FAITH

And the principle is this, that saving faith always manifests itself in good works. Do you see how James summarises his entire discussion in (2:26) The concluding principle is simple. When there is separation, there is death. Now that is true:

(a) PHYSICALLY:

Is this not what death is ? Separation, when the soul separates from the body ! And this is true:

(b) SPIRITUALLY:

When faith is separated from works. You see, without works faith is nothing but a corpse, void of vitality, and useless to everyone except the undertaker. I was interested to discover that in the ancient world someone finding a person who appeared to be dead would hold a mirror under that person's nose. If marks appeared on the mirror, he knew the body was still alive although barely breathing. If no marks appeared on the mirror, he knew the body was dead and was good for nothing. Left unburied that body would sour, stink and spread disease.

My do you see what James is doing ? *He is taking the mirror of God's Word and placing alongside the person who claims to be a Christian. If nothing appears, if no fruit is being produced, then that faith is dead, good for nothing, but if something appears then that faith is alive.*

The preservation of dead bodies is called mortuary science. Experts who are skilled at beautifying and preserving dead bodies try to make them look lifelike, alive. I recall going into a wee cottage some years ago at the south side of the city. The lady of the home had asked me to call. I had the joy of pointing her sister to the Lord just shortly before this, now Martha was dead.

I was brought into the home, and the lady brought me down to the bedroom to view the body, do you know what she said ? She said, “ *Pastor I've never seen her looking as well.*” My what is true physically is also true spiritually. People whose faith is really dead try to look as much as possible like people whose faith is alive. They are like dead bodies trying to look like something they aren't. Like dead bodies, they don't do any good, and they quickly become offensive. I wonder is this a picture of you and me ? Are you so lifelike yet there are no works of love to prove the reality of your claim ? Abraham and Rahab demonstrated the reality of their faith by their works. Can you ?

Perhaps you're saying, “ *Well, Abraham was a great man of God and I'm just an ordinary believer.*” My that's why James places Rahab beside Abraham to show that even from the least and lowest, from the very youngest in the faith, God insists on works as an evidence of faith. Not one of us can plead background, environment or anything else as an excuse for not displaying the fruit of the Spirit. Rahab was a prostitute yet she proved her faith was real by her works. What about you ? Is your faith genuine ? Is it real ? Is it alive ? Is it active ? Do you have a faith that works ? Listen carefully, *will your faith get you to heaven ?*