

We are continuing our series titled Reconsidered in which we are exploring beliefs, theology, and aspects of our faith that we have....well... reconsidered. Last week Pen explored Scripture, its role in our lives. In his sermon he used a word that he admitted makes presbyterians uncomfortable and not often heard from our pulpit. He said testify.

I admit my eyebrows went up. While the word testify might give us pause, I've got the trump card of scandalous words to say in the pulpit: works righteousness. I'll tell you right now, we need works in our faith.

Yes works righteousness. Many of us may know the term by the historical definition you learned in history class. *that good works, deeds, and certain prayers could contribute to a person's salvation.* That is a very simplified definition. If your Medieval and Reformation history just isn't at the top of your mind, let me describe how works righteousness became a reprehensible term for protestants.

Works righteousness finds its footing in the passage of James that we read. Specifically verse 23. It says, *"You see that a person is considered justified by works and not by faith alone."* And in verse 14, which states, *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?"* These verses stand in stark contrast to the idea that is more familiar to us that come from Paul in his Letters to the Romans, the Galatians, and the Ephesians. Paul argues that was justified by our faith.

Works righteousness had its heyday with the Catholic Church from the 11th to the 15th century. There is sophisticated and complex theology addressing good works. Yet it was twisted and abused in the late medieval period. It reached a head in the 15th and early 16th century. The Catholic Church believed that while works could not initially give grace, they could merit an increase in grace and a greater reward in heaven.

That is to say, if you make it to heaven. Some souls did not get a go straight to heaven card. There was a chance a soul would be sent to purgatory.. Purgatory is the place a soul is sent when they die with the grace of God but must be punished for sins on earth. This will purify them, and then they can go to heaven.

If you would like to avoid purgatory and go straight to heaven, there is a solution. Believers could receive indulgences. Indulgences were special grants by the Church to reduce punishment due to sin. They were obtained by prayers, good works, and specific religious acts.

Oh I forgot another way...money.

Yes, the sale of indulgences was common and frequent. Towards the end of the 15th century, it became obscenely ridiculous. One of the most famous examples of how outlandish the sale of indulgences was Dominican Friar Johann Tetzel. He was commissioned by the Pope to raise funds to rebuild St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Tetzel went on a preaching tour in Germany during which he sold indulgences with the claims of spiritual insurance, forgiving future sins, and catchy phrases. One popular jingle was, “as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Most likely apocryphal, it was similar in spirit to Tetzel’s work. These ludicrous antics did not escape the attention of Tetzel’s contemporary German monk, Martin Luther.

Luther was so appalled by this and other abuses by the church. He posted his criticisms, all 95 of them, on the cathedral door. Luther’s 95 Theses, the document credited with starting the Protestant Reformation, was primarily concerned with the sale of indulgences, the perversion of theology, questions of ecclesiastical authority, and the abuse it caused people. Luther vehemently condemned the sale of indulgences. He

condemned teachings that said salvation could be earned. He dismissed the scripture on which this was based.

Luther's disdain for the Book of James clung to it for centuries. It still has an impact on our view of James to this day. This resulted in the Book of James to be looked at as an outcast of the New Testament canon, the symbol of controversy and disagreement. *Yet, the truth is everyone who dismisses James from one side of their mouth agrees with James from the other side. James may be the dissenting opinion but in fact brings unity for a deeper understanding of God and our faith.*

Two ideas in James seem to get conflated and rile the masses up. The first, faith without works is dead v.17 and 26. The second, we are justified by works not by our faith verse 24.

Considering the first point, yes, faith without works is dead. I believe that due to its proximity to justification by works, there has been a natural aversion to the idea of a faith reliant on works. It's a case of guilt by association. In fact, faith with works may not need to be reconsidered but considered in its own rite.

In this first part of James there is a repeated theme of inspiration leads to action. Before the section we heard today, James instructs his audience on the proper response to the word of God. He warns his audience to be a doer of the word and not a hearer. He is instructing us. Let the word stir us to action. Let it lead us to live it out and not just take it in. This is an active belief for our tradition today. We claim that the last step of biblical interpretation is how it changes our lives or leads us to action. If it does not do that then maybe we need to reconsider our understanding.

James continues this theme of inspiration to action by stating faith naturally leads us to good works. This is because of what faith is. Scholar Martha Moore-Keish describes faith in three parts. Moore-Keish encourages us to consider faith “ as knowledge, as trust, as confession.”

Faith as knowledge means we know God and believe the irrefutable truths of God. It is more than knowing things about God. We know who God is. We know what God has done.

Faith as trust means our knowledge of God is more than an accepted idea. Faith as trust is, but we trust in God, meaning there is a personal reliance and relationship with the one who created us. We trust because we encounter God, God seeks us, and we are not alone.

Faith as confession is the way we respond. It is the action we take because we have true faith.. We can confess our faith in words but it must be followed up by lives that align to those words. It is the way we care for our neighbor and obey the will of God who cares for us. Moore Keish says that this third aspect of faith is especially important to James. Faith is practical for James. In the context of James, faith is works. So when our faith does not lead us to action, it is dead. It has been hollow and merely pretense

Throughout history, most leaders of the church have agreed with this (while still being distrusting of the Book of James). Early Church father Origen wrote that we will be judged not “on our faith alone..Inor on our conduct alone.” John Calvin believed that “faith without love gives no profit indeed its sheer loss.”¹ The love Calvin refers to are works of mercy, so without those faith is but a pretense. John Wesley, founder of the Methodists, used James’s own words to describe faith without good works as “dead” and added “a devilish” faith. Luther himself agreed that “whoever does not do such works is without faith.”

Work and faith have always gone hand in hand. We don’t need to reconsider this but remember to consider it in itself.

¹ Calvin *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke Vol III*, 282.

With that part cleared up we can look at James's second claim. The idea that we are justified by our works and not by faith. This seems to be a direct rebuttal to Paul, but not entirely. **James states that we are justified by works *not by faith alone*.** James does not exclude the presence of faith when we are justified before God. For James faith and works are joined together.

The writer then references two people from the Old Testament as evidence of his argument. Abraham the man with whom God made a covenant. Abraham whose faith was tested by being ordered to sacrifice his son. And Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho who hid spies of the Israelites and saved their lives. Rahab the non-Israelite who was blessed by God for her actions and would later be named in the genealogy of Jesus.

These two people did exhibit great trust in God, they took a chance that could have caused them to lose everything. Their trust was demonstrated by decisions they made. I can confirm that. What I can't do is say with definition if it was their faith or their works that justified them to God's blessing. My guess is it may have been both. Yet, that debate has enough voices I don't need to lend mine.

However, I can say that James's interpretation provides a better understanding of the relationship between faith and works.

Verse 22 states, "You see that faith was active along with his works, **and faith was brought to completion by the works.**" *Faith was active alongside and faith was brought to completion by the works.* Due to inherited opinions, many in the protestant tradition have tried to separate faith from works as far as east is from west. Yet, the truth is they are active alongside each other. Faith without works is dead, and works without faith are empty. James has been seen as an outlier but James is the source of finding balance and unity between works and faith. Faith is completed when it informs what we do in life.

What I can say is that we may have been looking in the wrong direction when reading this passage. This scripture is always used in discussions on justification, how we are reconciled to God, sanctification, righteousness, law, freedom etc. While it does contribute to a rich discussion of those theological ideas, was that what James was trying to address?

What if James was not writing a theological argument on salvation or justification? What if he wasn't writing to contradict Paul? Or even if he was directly responding to Paul's ideas, what if there was a greater purpose?

What if James was writing to correct a people and give instruction to a growing religion?.

James is considered a book of wisdom literature, it is practical advice. The larger context of James and particularly this section provides guidance on how we live as a community and within a community. Focusing on James's emphasis on community our focus can shift from the loaded verses of dead faith and works versus faith. We can then see James's primary concern in writing. wh

James asks a rhetorical question about a hypothetical situation that could occur today. In verses 15 to 17, James writes, “15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 **So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**”

Or in other words, If you see your neighbor in great need and you only offer them platitudes, what actual help are you providing?” That shows faith is dead because in faith we experience God and are transformed by it. The love that God shows us leads to mercy and grace. We respond in our love or works of mercy to others. Simply put, faith moves us to meet the needs of those around us. That is faith that is alive.

“Reconsidered: Works Righteousness”

Rev. Robert Galloway

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That is faith that can be seen. That is righteous before God. That is the proper interaction between faith and works.

Responding to our neighbors' needs shows we have a full and complete faith. Those together make us righteous before God. It is good that we have questions and seek answers. It is right that we yearn to know God more deeply. Yet, we can't allow division and debates distract us from the work God is calling us to through our faith.

Now, I will admit to you I cheated a bit. I'm not sure I reconsidered works righteousness. I still am wary when it is those words are mentioned. What I have reconsidered is what living faith looks like, how works and faith are inseparable, and the true intention of James. Reconsideration has allowed the word of God to be heard more clearly. What is being said speaks to life in today's world and informs our faith on how we will work for God this day and every day.