

For those familiar with Reformation history, you will recall the most salient disagreement between the Roman Catholic Church and the emerging Protestant Church in the 16th Century was about the topic of Justification. On one hand, Martin Luther came to the conclusion – which is still the rallying cry of the Reformation – that Justification is by Faith Alone!

"But what of James?" The Roman Catholic Church replied, and would quote James 2:24, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."

It didn't help Martin Luther's case when his first reply was just to dismiss, or at the very least, subordinate the book of James. In his introduction to his 1522 version of the New Testament, Martin Luther famously called James, "an epistle of straw."¹ (Luther would later in his life reconcile whatever trepidations he had about considering James on the same level as the book of Romans.)

So when selecting which book to preach through, I was very reluctant to choose the book of James, because it has been the subject of centuries of debate, analysis, and partisan criticism. Roman Catholics today will still point to James 2:24 to their Protestant friends, perhaps many times causing the Protestant to retreat.

I am not aiming to resolve the supposed controversy this morning; I think the Roman Catholic position and the Protestant position on justification are MUCH closer to the other than most lay people would imagine. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas himself, said, "The hope of justification therefore is not found in works, but in faith alone."²

Remember if you will, I mentioned when we first approached the Book of James addressing the neighborly importance of miscommunication. I referenced this very subject – and how 490 years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the doors at Wittenburg, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church issued the "Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification," in which both parties acknowledge they agree on more than they originally thought.³

¹ "Darumb ist sanct Jacobs Epistel ein rechte stroern Epistel gegen sie, denn sie doch nein Evangelisch art an ihr hat." Martin Luther, Preface to the New Testament, 1522 (<https://bibles-online.net/flippingbook/1530-luther/14/>), 14. English Translation at, Martin Luther, *Prefaces to the Books of the Bible*, Wolfmueller, https://wolfmueller.co/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Prefaces-to-the-Books-of-the-Bible_with-cover.pdf (accessed October 21, 2021), 87.

² *Non est ergo in eis spes iustificationis, sed in sola fide*, in Thomas Aquinas, *Diui Thomae Aquinatis, ordinis prae-dicatorum, viri, et vitae sanctimonia, etc.*, (Paris: Ioannem de Roigny, 1560), 233. ([Current Link](#))

³ The whole declaration is fascinating, and can be found here:

<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-justificazion/en.html>. See especially, Section 2.13: "Opposing interpretations and applications of the biblical message of justification were in the sixteenth century a principal cause of the division of the Western church and led as well to doctrinal condemnations. A common understanding of justification is therefore fundamental and indispensable to overcoming that division. By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with

This is, perhaps, an example of James 3, in which he alludes to the tongue of fire setting a forest ablaze. But that's for next week.

This is not a controversy that has settled battle lines, separating the Roman Catholic Church and all the Protestants. No, this controversy has even recently caused divisions within Reformed Confessional circles, where disagreement about the subject has led to dismissals from prominent theological positions.⁴

The controversy between Churches, while important historically, is far subordinate to the point of scripture, which is to "teach us what to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of him."⁵ So I would rather not turn this into a history lesson, but I would only caution that many of us – and perhaps there are some Roman Catholics who would hear this, too – come unto this conversation with many pre-existing biases about what we have already inferred.

My caution is that we be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow unto the anger of man as we hear these verses once again – and see the beauty of our faith and works grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory.

Which is where we must begin again. Last week, we opened James 2 and recognized James is grounding his entire discussion on faith by commanding the brethren, "hold – or grip⁶ – the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory!" This faith, not a man-made faith, is a living faith, given to us: by grace you have been saved, through faith, which faith is a gift from God."⁷

As I mentioned last week, brothers and sisters, remembering this is extremely important. It's the foundation of the conversation.

What does a faith that is NOT in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory look like? I'll give away the punchline, it's a bad faith. It's a dead faith. The man-made faith that looks in the mirror will always fail. We saw two examples of this last week:

"Only those statements that can be verified empirically are meaningful as truth statements" is itself a truth statement that cannot be verified empirically, so it is

the result that this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner." An archived version of the Vatican's response can be found here:

https://web.archive.org/web/20160502211532/https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_01081998_off-answer-catholic_en.html

⁴ See Edmund Clowney, "On Norman Shepherd's Controversial, Distinctive Theology" at *The Aquila Report*,

<https://www.theaquilareport.com/edmund-clowney-on-norman-shepherds-controversial-distinctive-theology/> (accessed October 21, 2021).

⁵ WSC Question 3.

⁶ See BDAG at ἔχετε, #3

⁷ Ephesians 2:8, see note in "Faith Unto Good Works (Live Faith)," October 17, 2021 ([Stable Link](#)).

meaningless. "There are no absolute truths" has made an absolute truth claim that contradicts its premise. But there are more than these two creeds of logical positivism and moral relativism.

In the 19th Century Auguste Comte developed his own humanistic faith, and his foundational faith claim to his philosophy was this: The wisdom of man gradually progresses through three stages: the Theological, the Metaphysical, and finally the Scientific. The Theological humanity believes in God because, like a baby, it does not know any better; the Metaphysical humanity grows up a little bit to understand that Human Reason is the authority, not some God-figure; but finally, the Scientific Man grows into full maturity In the "final state" wherein "the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions...and applies itself to the study of [universal] laws."

What's wrong with this faith of man?

- 1) Auguste Comte has communicated the absolute notion that this "final state" is one in which we make no claim to absolute notions. It also assumes absolute, or universal laws, that may not be changed.
- 2) Maybe a little more obscure: Comte's analogy of gradual maturity forgets his philosophy has no role model for future maturity – in other words, he is basing his ideal scientific man's maturity completely on faith. He no more knows if the scientific man has reached the height of maturity, or if he is simply a rebellious teenager, who thinks he knows more than everybody else. This is bad faith because it begins and ends with faith in man. Man is the author and finisher of this faith.

Auguste Comte is not simply a philosophical curiosity or trivia question. His philosophy turned into a full-blown religion of humanity with actual temples and saints and rites. It still has adherents in Brazil. The temple in Rio de Janeiro boldly claims, "Love as a principle, order as the basis, progress as the goal," forgetting that progress for the sake of progress, that is blind to the eternal, objective ideal (the perfect law of God!), and refuses to be judged by God, is no progress at all.

Again, this is not inconsequential. This early 19th-century scientism – called positivism – produced no good work. It produced evil. It promoted scientific partiality. It promoted racial stratification, appealing to "observable science" as an excuse to exalt one group and humiliate another. It influenced and gave an excuse to more recognizable movements, such as Marxism and Darwinism, which both ultimately devalue humanity as either mere commodities or mere accident. It influenced judicial philosophy even, leading to theories in which the famous Plessy v. Ferguson maintained that segregation of the races was lawful and good. What good work can come from this dead, man-made faith?

What of Existentialism? The more-modern faith movement that says there is no essential (or objectively ideal) man; your existence precedes the quintessential man; so make for your own "self" whatever you wish to be; there is no objective "man-ness" or "woman-

ness," or even "human-ness." What you identify as is more important than archaic cultural definitions. In fact, you don't even have to be either of the "primitive" binary classifications. You can identify as non-binary.

So not only does the existentialist demonstrate bad faith – dead faith – by acknowledging it is the essence of man to define his own essence – which is absurd; but in this case, it also encourages the (a) binary and (b) non-binary to be categorized into yet another binary, and then demand on faith that their internal, subjective identity absolutely must be externally, and objectively validated.

By showing the absurdity of the dead faith of man, I don't mean to make light of the crisis we're in. It's dangerous. There are real harmful consequences to indulging the idea that the "authentic self" is the ideal. That we can look in the mirror to determine what is best, without an outside judge. This is especially harmful for children. Faith in the "authentic self" will lead to anxiety and depression.

These are all dead faiths, incapable of producing good works, because even if they, by accident, coincide outwardly with the law of God – like an existentialist volunteering to feed the homeless – the motive behind these works is completely self-absorbed, completely consumed with the judgment of man, with no regard for the judgment of God.

This is the faith of man – faith in "science" or "anthropology" – that at every point categorizes humans into layers of "value," elevating those of value to them, and dismissing those on the bottom as "unworthy" of actual assistance. Perhaps they create a huge public relations campaign for bringing awareness to world hunger, but the minute the cameras are off treat the issue as someone else's problem. Perhaps they use their great wealth and influence to move the government to use other people's money to enact their preferred social system, but when confronted with an actual poor man, they say "Go in peace, be warmed and filled." "I built a public program for people like you; go in peace, be warmed and filled." What good is that!?

This is a faith without Christ. This is man's faith grounded in itself, and nothing else. **This faith is alone. They say they have faith, but it is not in or with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.** They say they have faith, but have no good works in them because their faith is not in and with our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. James 2:1 is translated, "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ," but grammatically, it can also be read, "hold the faith of Jesus Christ, or hold Jesus Christ's faith." The point is: this pure, live faith is outside man and grounded in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory.

The man that says he has faith may truly believe in God; they may even convince themselves their actions are godly, because they truly believe that God does exist while performing them. But though they believe "that God is one" – though they believe IN God, do they believe God?

Again, James is referring to the Old Testament Law, where in Deuteronomy 6, Israel is commanded, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is one." But what great commandment follows? "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."⁸ Believing "that the Lord is one" was not the entire law. This is the foundation for all Good Works, and James knows it. He constantly refers back to the "Perfect Law of God," and any works done outside this law – especially this great commandment – are done in bad faith, in dead faith.

Abraham obviously believed IN God in our Old Testament reading in Genesis 15, but when God told Abraham, "your offspring shall be more numerous than the stars of the heavens," Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.⁹

Paul uses the example of Abraham, as well as James, and rather than see the superficial or apparent disagreement, hear what Paul is saying and what James is saying.

If you have attended my Sunday School class on the doctrine of justification, you'll recall that I made the observation that the word "justification" and "justify" can be used in various ways in English – all related, but with subtle differences. There are more able linguists than I am who make the same case between Paul and James – that while their use of the term "edikaiothe" have to do with the idea of righteousness and justice, there are subtle distinctions.

I am not denying this at all, I affirm it. Our Confession of faith we read this morning addresses in concise summary what is being meant: "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love."

Faith – in Christ – as the INSTRUMENT or catalyst of justification, is distinct from Faith – in Christ – as a RESPONSE to justification. Paul's emphasis is on the former; James does not deny faith as the instrument of justification, but emphasizes what justifying faith continues to look like. Paul does not deny that a justifying faith – in Christ – produces good works, but is concerned to show that our justification at the outset is not of ourselves in any form of fashion.

But there's a point of agreement I'm trying to emphasize here, and not satisfy the ecclesiastical debate; the point needs to be emphasized that neither Paul nor James argues for a faith that IS alone – a faith without Christ; a solitary faith with man as its only participant – the ghost town of "Faith". That faith of man is dead and cannot produce good works.

⁸ Deuteronomy 6:4

⁹ Genesis 15:5-6

James is emphasizing a faith that is alive, grounded in Christ, acknowledges that Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness in Genesis 15, but that was not the end. This righteousifying faith was not dead. It was/is/will be active. It was/is/will be alive. This faith in the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, was, literally, working with Abraham's works.¹⁰ Abraham's faith was not alone. It was not a man-made faith. Genesis 15 was FULFILLED in the drama of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, and there we see the completion of faith by his works. But these works were done WITHIN the context of a live, justifying faith in the Lord, not a faith alone, or apart from him.

The works demonstrated by the prostitute Rahab were done within the context of her faith in the Lord – not apart or alone from it. Rahab's faith – justifying faith – was not in the faith of the Israelites, or in the faith of Man. Rahab says to the spies, "I know the LORD has given you the land."¹¹ We know you will win because the LORD is your God.¹² Rahab's faith in the LORD of glory – not in man – was alive and fulfilled in her good works.

Martin Luther removed his "epistle of straw" comment regarding the book of James from subsequent editions of his New Testament. And though he once said he would hand over his doctoral credentials to anyone who would reconcile James and Paul, Luther himself came to a simple reconciliation: "Faith is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith."¹³

The point here, again, is not to settle the disagreement between or within denominations; but to remember that our own righteousness – any works we do outside of Christ – is as filthy rags; Your works need Jesus. Because they are dead without faith in him. And it's not enough just to say you have faith. Everyone has faith. If that faith looks into the mirror for satisfaction, elevating man as the measure, straining to see the "authentic self" as the standard, but forgetting that reflection is a distorted representation of reality – that faith is a lonely faith; it is without Christ; it is alone, it is dead, and it will produce no good work.

But if your faith instead looks unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross for you; endured the hostility – literally, the ἀντιλογία, the anti-Word – so that your faith may be strengthened, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.¹⁴

¹⁰ βλέπεις ὅτι ἡ πίστις **συνήργει τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ**, καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἔργων ἡ πίστις ἐτελειώθη (You see that the faith was synergistic (working with) his works.)

¹¹ Joshua 2:9

¹² Joshua 2:11

¹³ Quoted in Ronald Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1950), 331. [Link here](#)

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:2-3

This is the Christ that owns your faith – who, instead of judging your dead, man-made bad faith, showed mercy upon you, assuming the judgment for your sins upon himself, and mercifully giving you his perfect good works. So as the body apart from the spirit is dead, brothers and sisters, so any faith apart from Christ is dead. Look to Christ for life; pray for his faith; pray that your works to one another be done faithfully to his glory.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.