

## ARE YOU GOD'S FRIEND?

James 2:20-24

### I. INTRODUCTION: I

1. **2** The epistle written by James is one of the most practical books in the New Testament.

A. Tradition (not inspiration) holds that this epistle was written by James the Lord's half-brother of Jesus (Gal 1:18,19).

(1) One of the "pillars" in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18; Gal. 2:9, 12).

(2) He is not to be confused with the two apostles named James:

(a) James the son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John (Matt. 4:21; 10:2; 17:1; Mk. 3:17; 10:35; 13:3; Lk. 9:54; Acts 1:13; martyred by A.D. 44 as recorded in Acts 12:2).

(b) James the son of Alphaeus; or "James the Less" (Matt. 10:3; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15; Acts 1:13).

(3) He presided at the council held in Jerusalem to consider the case of the Gentiles (Acts 12:17; 15:13-29; 21:18-24).

B. The epistle was originally addressed to a Jewish audience: "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad:" (Jas. 1:1).

C. Many reputable scholars believe the epistle of James was one of the very first New Testament books written (c.A.D. 46-49).

D. Subject matter:

(1) One source succinctly notes this epistle is about the "fruits, not the roots" of Christianity (*Encyclopedia of the Bible*).

(2) I would describe it as a very practical book on how Christians are to perfect holiness in their lives.

(3) The epistle is especially known for its discussion of "faith and works."

2. As a basis for our lesson I want to focus on the following passage from James's epistle:

**\*\*Jas. 2:20-24:** "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."

3. **3** Let's consider some important lessons to be learned from these five verses.

### II. DISCUSSION:

1. **4** Salvation by "faith only" is false:

A. Martin Luther championed the doctrine of salvation by "faith only" so prevalent in Protestant churches today.

(1) Luther's "faith only" theology was an over-reaction to the abuses in the Roman Catholic Church of his day (i.e., salvation via meritorious works).

(2) Luther went so far as to label the epistle of James as a "straw epistle" and he did not consider it inspired or worthy of inclusion in the New Testament.

B. Normally we focus on vv. 24, 26 when countering the false teaching of salvation by "faith only."

**\*\*Jas. 2:24, 26:** "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

- C. We usually don't put much emphasis on vv. 20-23 to counter the false "faith only" position. However, these verses alone **unequivocally** destroy the "faith only" doctrine!
- (1) "Faith only" folks are very fond of such passages as John 3:16 to support their position:  
**Jn. 3:16:** *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*
  - (2) "You see, it says it right there! All you have to do to be saved is "believe"!
- D. \*\* Sure enough John 3:16 says, *"whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* But what does God mean when He says "believe"? James 2:20-23 explains "believe" by using Abraham as a concrete example.
- (1) \*\* Note v. 23 says, *"Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."*
  - (2) Just reading that statement alone gives great aid and comfort to the "faith only" folks.
  - (3) But we must read and interpret the statement in light of the surrounding verses.
  - (4) What does James tell us the Scripture meant when it said, *"Abraham believed God"*?
    - (a) \*\* Verse 21 gives us the answer.
    - (b) The Scriptures tell us Abraham "believed" **ONLY** when *"he offered Isaac his son on the altar"* (v. 21).
    - (c) \*\* Abraham's belief was only valid when it included action (i.e., James's "works").
    - (d) If Abraham had not obeyed God through his actions, his faith would have been just as dead as the belief of the demons! **Jas. 2:19:** *"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe — and tremble!"*
- E. As with almost all false teaching; it comes about primarily because people isolate verses from their context and "jump to conclusions."
- F. **5** Insofar as salvation by "faith only" is concerned, one does not even need one verse from James 2 to prove it is false!
- G. \*\* The context of John 3 proves there's more to **belief** in John 3:16 than simply a "mental acceptance" of Jesus as Savior.
- (1) \*\* As one reads John 3 please note v. 36.
  - (2) John the Baptist is speaking: *"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."* (KJV)
  - (3) The ASV makes it clear that belief often includes the notion of obedience: *"He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him."* (ditto for NASV)
  - (4) The Greek word for "believeth not" (KJV) or "obeyeth not" (ASV, NASV) is *apeitheo*.
  - (5) The word *apeitheo* is used 14 times in the NT and literally means "disobedient."
 

**\*\*Rom. 2:8:** *"but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness — indignation and wrath,"*

**I Pet. 4:17:** *"For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"*
  - (6) Thus, a belief not coupled with action (i.e., obedience) is described as "believeth not."
  - (7) \*\* Another example: In Hebrews 3:18-19 note the Scriptures make an equivocation of *"did not obey"* (v. 18) and *"unbelief"* (v. 19).

- H. **\*\*** Clearly from John 3 (and Hebrews 3) an objective reader can discern a saving “belief” is an “obedient” belief.
- I. But I want to dig a bit deeper into James 2:20-24.
- (1) James says that once Abraham had “*offered Isaac his son on the altar*” ....it was only then that Scripture said:
  - (2) “*Abraham believed God*” and,
  - (3) “*And he was called the friend of God.*”

***That brings us to the meat of the lesson. We each need to ask ourselves the question:***

**2. 6 Am I a friend of God?**

- A. Am I like Abraham? Do I have the faith of Abraham?
- (1) Like Abraham, do I believe God exists.
  - (2) And, like Abraham, my faith goes much deeper than the mere recognition He exists.: do I believe to the point...
    - (a) I “*diligently seek Him*” through obedience? Heb. 11:6
    - (b) My manner of life plainly confesses I am a “*stranger and pilgrim on the earth*”? My manner of life plainly declares I seek a heavenly “*homeland*”? (cf. Heb. 11:13-15)
- B. **\*\*** I think most folks take serving God and going to heaven to two extremes:
- (1) Theological convoluted and complicated (e.g., end times nonsense like premillennialism; complicated organizational schemes, man-made rituals, etc.).
  - (2) Others make it too easy! Pretty much everyone is going as long as you’re not a hardened criminal or a terrorist, etc. (**Acts 14:22**: “*strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,’ they said.*” NIV)
  - (3) Jesus succinctly summed up what is necessary to please God in **\*\*Matthew 22:34-40**.
- C. **\*\*** As we consider the two greatest commandments, I want us to especially pay attention to the fact that compliance with both **absolutely** requires:
- (1) A total abandonment of selfishness on our part.
  - (2) A total dedication to serving others before self (whether that service is to God or to our fellow man).

**3. 7 The first and great commandment**: “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*”

- A. **\*\*** Luke’s account: “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,*” (Lk. 10:27)
- B. **\*\*** God cannot be second place in our lives! He cannot be second in our list of priorities! He cannot even be a “close second”!
- Matt. 5:6**: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.*”
- Matt. 6:33**: “*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*”
- C. **\*\*** How committed are you to serving God? Reiterate the two passages and Matthew 22:37.
- Matt. 16:24-27**: “*Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his*

life for My sake will find it. 26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

**Jn. 12:25:** "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

D. The Lord requires our **total** and **absolute** commitment to Him! Lk 10:27 (heart→soul→strength→mind).

**\*\***"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried."

—G. K. Chesterton

E. **8** Why? God requires us to:

(1) **\*\*** Make a complete self-sacrifice:

**Rom. 12:1-2:** "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

(a) Are you giving God a complete self-sacrifice?

(b) Is it reflected in your daily living?

(c) Is it reflected by the things you watch (don't watch), the things you do (or don't do), the words you say (or don't say!), the people with whom you associate (or don't associate with!), the way you treat your job/career, the laws of man you obey (or don't obey!), etc., etc.

(2) **\*\*** Perfect holiness: God wants to dwell in us, but before He can we must be totally committed to giving a continuous effort to perfect holiness in our lives.

**2 Cor 6:16-7:1:** "For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

'I will dwell in them  
And walk among them.  
I will be their God,  
And they shall be My people.'

17 Therefore

'Come out from among them  
And be separate, says the Lord.  
Do not touch what is unclean,  
And I will receive you."  
18 'I will be a Father to you,  
And you shall be My sons and daughters,  
Says the LORD Almighty.'

7:1 Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."; Rom. 8:29; Gal. 2:20

(3) **\*\*** Be totally committed:

**1 Cor. 6:19-20:** "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

**\*\*Phil. 1:21:** "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

**\*\*Phil. 1:21:** "For to me, to live is \_\_\_\_\_, and to die is \_\_\_\_\_."

F. Anything short of this (reiterate points) will mean we will fall short of heaven!

**\*\*Matt. 16:24-26:** “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?’”

**\*\*Matt. 7:13-14:** “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (explain ramifications for this audience!)

4. **9** The second great commandment: “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matt. 22:39)

A. God always comes first, but our fellowman comes next before self!

(1) I took *microeconomics* in graduate school(aka “Theory of the Firm”).

(2) It’s entirely logical, but I was quite surprised when I found out this great truth about business: “The final claimant on the profits of the firm is ownership.”

(3) In other words, the owner is the last guy to get paid! Labor is paid first, management is paid next, then investors, and finally, dead last, the owner!

B. **\*\* Christianity is parallel: I always come in dead last! Matt. 20:16:** “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

C. In this regard, Christ gave us the great example: **10** Phil. 2:1-8

D. **11** Applications:

(1) **\*\* Family:**

(a) **Physical: 1 Tim. 5:8:** “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”

(b) **Spiritual: Eph. 5:25; 6:4:** “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.”; **Prov. 22:6:** “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

(i) Are you taking care of your family spiritually speaking?

(ii) We strive diligently to make sure our children have a secular education, but what about spiritually?

(iii) We make sure our children go to the best doctor/hospital if sick or injured; but what about taking the to the “Great physician?!” Matt. 9:12

(2) **\*\* Brethren: Jn. 13:34-35:** “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”; **1 Jn. 3:16:** “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”; **1 Jn. 3:18:** “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”; **1 Pet. 1:22:** “Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.” (KJV); Heb. 10:24-25

(3) **\*\* Needy: Eph. 4:28:** “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.”; **1 Jn. 3:17:** “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?”

(4) **\*\* Lost: Matt. 16:26; 2 Cor. 5:10-11a; Mk. 9:42-48; Rom. 10:1:** “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.”; **Rom. 9:1-3:** “I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and continual

*grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh,”*

### **III. CONCLUSION: 12**

#### **I. Recall the text of our lesson:**

**Jas. 2:20-24:** *“But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.”*

2. Abraham was called a “*friend of God*” because his faith was an active, working faith.
3. Abraham was totally committed! Jas. 2:21
4. What about your faith? Is it alive or dead? Could you legitimately be “*called the friend of God*”?
5. Invitation

An original sermon by Craig Thomas, evangelist working with  
the Westside church of Christ, Bloomington, IN