

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

One of the weekly stores that I go to is Costco. To shop at this store, you are required to pay an annual fee to have the privilege of buying food and other items there. Once this fee is paid, the member must present a card as evidence of having paid the fee; only then is entrance to the store allowed. The card is necessary to get into the store, but it is not the ultimate reason that the person is granted access. The paid fee is the ultimate reason for the entrance, and the card is the evidence that the fee has been paid.

Once inside, you have the privilege of shopping, but you still are required to present your card at the time of purchase. There, your membership is scanned and your items are accounted for.

Last week we looked at the idea of justification in James and Paul. We wrestled with how it works that Paul can say that we are justified by faith and not by works while James says that we are not justified by faith alone but by works. For many people, this has caused them to think that there is a massive contradiction in between James and Paul. This week, I want us to see that Paul has a similar way of thinking to James, just that he uses his language a little bit differently, and this is due to the reality that we are already justified and yet we will be judged by works because the judgment has not yet happened. So how is it that we are justified by faith alone but judged by our works?

Receive Christ's Payment for You by Faith

The argument Paul has been making throughout Romans to this point has been this: we are so sinful that none of us can enter into God's perfect presence on our own attempt. From 1:18-3:18 he has been working out the problem of sin – we are defiled and unable to come in to God's presence because he is holy and perfect and righteous and we are not.

The problem with humanity is that we think that we can somehow do enough good to get into God's presence. If we could just show God how good we are, maybe he would accept us. But Paul makes the argument in chapter 3:1ff that there is no one righteous, not a single person, who can come to God because God is perfect in his righteousness and we are not. As the Book of Common Prayer will say, "there is no health within us."

The problem with sin is that it is like a disease that has killed our internal organs. We can function for a time, but slowly we are wasting away. We can eat healthy, exercise, and do everything good for us. But the reality is that at the end of the day, we will all face certain death.

This has been Paul's point from Romans 1:18 to our passage here. There is no health in us. We all are infected with the terminal disease of sin. We will die because of this dreaded terminal condition unless someone comes to our rescue. And anyone who thinks that they can heal themselves is deceived.

Justified by Faith Alone: Now & Not Yet

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But here is the good news: But now a righteousness apart from the law has appeared. This is Paul's point. You can't heal yourself. You can't do anything to take away your terminal condition. But now someone has come along with the health that you need to cure you. But in order for you to be healed, they must give up their healthy organs for you and die for you.

"No!" you protest. "I will get better myself! I won't accept their offer!" But the doctor makes it clear that if you don't accept their offer, you will certainly die. There is no way that we can fight off this sickness in and of ourselves. We can try to do everything to fight it off, but nothing will cure us unless we accept this healthy donor's gift.

In this way, this is what justification by faith is like. It's an imperfect comparison, but it is helpful. You receive a gift not by anything that you do, but believing in the promise that by accepting their gift you will not die. Justification by faith alone is the promise that you can't change yourself when you're dying, only Christ's death for you can change you. And you receive this gift not by something that you do, but by believing in the promise that life is available for you.

And when you accept that gift, it frees you from that terminal illness.

When Paul says that we are not justified by works of the law, what he means is that there is nothing we can do to put us in good standing with God. We aren't well enough to do anything to fix our condition. We can't please him because we have rejected his gift. But when we receive his gift, believing that he offers the cure for us in Jesus Christ, we are suddenly put in a good standing before him.

Justification by faith means that we are trusting that God has the cure for us in Christ Jesus. It is saying that we aren't able to cure ourselves. And this will keep us from boasting – it is excluded because we are not aiming to prove how great we are that we got on the donor list, but rather that we were chosen to receive this gift, we heard the offer, we humbled ourselves to accept it, and we graciously have been given the promise of life.

Christ is the one who makes us acceptable before God. Christ is the one whose perfect health enables us to be healthy. The righteousness that appears apart from the law comes in Jesus Christ. The OT Law and Prophets spoke about his coming. But it is his death that gives us life. It is receiving him by faith that brings his righteousness to us. And when we receive Christ's righteousness by faith, we...

Display Christ's Work for You by Works

We might be surprised, then, to find that Paul also emphasizes the importance of good works for final salvation. In 2:6-11 Paul makes it clear that God will repay according to works (v. 6); those who do evil will suffer wrath and indignation (v. 8) and affliction and distress (v. 9) while those who do good will enjoy eternal life (vv. 7, 10). How can this be?

First, it is important for us to understand that good works aren't to make God happy with us, because Paul will make it clear that God has welcomed us in Christ Jesus already (Rom. 15:7). We obey not because we want to earn God's favour but because we have his favour. God's removal of condemnation (8:1) means that we no longer live for our old desires, but the new ones that he has put in our hearts. Chapter 8 makes it clear that the change is due to the work of the Holy Spirit who has come into our lives.

The result is that the change of desire that God has worked by our initial justification will bring about the good works that show that we have been changed from death to life. The Costco card is was paid for us, but now the Costco card enables us to get to the check out. The Costco card is the proof that we have accepted his work for us. And that is what good works are. They are the proof that we have accepted his work for us.

So let's work out this Costco example a bit more. Imagine Costco is heaven. Now I hope that heaven isn't like Costco – it's so crazy and chaotic in there! But let's imagine for a moment that our entrance into Costco is due to the card at the door. The card doesn't get you in, but the card points to the reality that you're a member. That's what good works do. They are the proof that you have accepted the gift of Christ's righteousness for you so that you can enter into heaven.

This is how Paul can say in Romans 2:13 that the doers of the law will be declared righteous (2:13). So on the one hand we are justified in the past but we will be justified in the future. Justification is both now and not yet. God has already said, "You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased" and will one day say "enter into the joy of your master's rest." Both are true. And there is no contradiction.

So when we come through the book of James and wonder how James can talk about not being justified by faith alone but by works (2:14), we can understand that he is speaking about the final justification.

God is working out his saving purposes now and they are not yet fully realized. We have the realities of being seated with Christ already but we are not yet fully there. When it is both already but not yet, then we can make sense of so much of the Bible's teaching. We are living in between the times. We live in this present evil age yet are citizens of the age to come. We fight sin now because sin has been defeated.

There is no contradiction between James and Paul. Rather, there is the working out of the complexities of our salvation here and now. And as we work out that faith, we do so with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who works to will and to act according to his good pleasure.

Have you embraced him by faith? Then show it! Live it!