

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

James 2: 18-21

Dear brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord that it's time to read the bible again. We will continue reading James chapter 2. Let's read from verse 18 to verse 21 today.

Yesterday, we read that James presented a very revolutionary concept: faith without works is dead! We also repeatedly emphasized that James' words are addressed to saints who have already been saved. Every saint whose spirit has been regenerated already possesses eternal life from God. This life will not die, but it may stagnate and stop growing, naturally preventing the bearing of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Regarding this state of stagnation, James diagnosed it by saying that this faith is dead, meaning that this faith is no longer functional.

Faith is supposed to be the channel that connects the spirit and the soul. Using today's neural network concept, it's like transmitting the Holy Spirit's instructions from the spirit to the corresponding unit in the soul through connections. The more connections there are, the smoother the communication between the spirit and the soul, and the more the person will grow in life and become more experienced. When faith is alive, these connections will continue to increase, and the rate at which connections increase is the rate at which a person's spiritual life grows. When faith is dead, the increase rate becomes zero, meaning no more connections are made, and the person's spiritual life remains in its current state. The connections already made are still there, but no new ones are added.

Dear brothers and sisters, if you compare your past experiences, you may find that after being saved, you went through a period of lostness. When you look back, you will find that the spiritual life and experiences you once had are still there. This is the characteristic of eternal life: it does not decay, wither, or decrease, but it also does not grow because during the period you were lost, your faith was dead. The main factor leading to the death of faith is a guilty conscience.

The conscience lies between the spirit and the soul and is the gate through which faith must pass to form connections. When the conscience is guilty, faith loses its function at that point, and naturally, the soul cannot be transformed at that point, resulting in no bodily actions being brought out. Changes in the soul are invisible to others, but physical actions can be observed. Therefore, a person's actions become the indicator of whether their faith is healthy. From this perspective, James' insight is remarkable. But James does not stop here; he continues to develop the concept that faith without works is dead. In verses 18 to 20, James further tells us that faith and works cannot be separated.

Verse 18: "But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'"

Through James' description, it seems like there are two people in a dialogue here. Both have received grace and were saved believers. You, represent the saint with faith but without works, and I, represent the saint with both faith and works. When you declare that you have faith, since I cannot see it, I will challenge you to show me your faith. Of course, faith is abstract and invisible. If you have no works, how can you show me your faith? When you say you believe, that you have faith, and that you have been justified by God, only you and God know; I cannot see it.

Dear brothers and sisters, justification by faith is the most fundamental gospel truth. We also preach it this way to help gospel friends believe and tell them that once they believe, they can accept the redemption that Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross. Their sins will be forgiven, and they will be justified by God. All these are correct. If you sincerely believe, God will justify you because of the redemption of Jesus Christ. This is positional justification. Before and after you believe, there is no change in you, but God has already placed you in a position of righteousness. Now you are qualified to become a child of God, but this is a matter between you and God; how would others know?

Therefore, usually after gospel friends believe, we quickly ask them to consider baptism. This is their act of obedience to God because God says, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). They are willing to obey and bear witness before everyone. Being baptized as a testimony is their action. This is something everyone can see. They use the act of baptism to prove their faith to others. They are justified by people in this matter of believing.

So here we see two kinds of justification: one is positional justification, which is towards God, where God justifies you; the other is dispositional justification, which is towards men and can also be seen as reality of justification. Actually, every truth we experience has these two aspects: one is before God, and the other is before men, or in other words, as a testimony to men. Positional justification is the base of dispositional justification. Without positional justification, there will be no dispositional justification. Positional justification comes first, and dispositional justification comes afterward.

In all spiritual matters, we first have positional justification. But merely having this justification is not enough; we also need to bring in subjective experiences and live out a beautiful testimony in those experiences. This testimony can be seen by others and can be praised by others. This completes dispositional justification. If some saints have received some theological education, they would say this is the concept of "already and not yet." However, I always feel that this way of speaking is a bit convoluted and makes people confused. Personally, I think dividing this process into positional and dispositional makes it much clearer.

In all spiritual matters, God always first gives us a position. For example, once we believe, we become children of God the Father. This is a positional matter. We must first have the position of a child before we can continue to grow in grace until one day we can obtain the status of a son of God, which is a dispositional or reality matter.

Let's return to the second half of this verse: you have faith, I have works. You cannot show me your faith without works, but I can show you my faith by my works

because my works are the manifestation of my faith, the evidence, and proof of my faith.

Verse 19: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!"

James continues the debate between the two persons. If you persist in believing that having faith alone is sufficient, James then presents a very thought-provoking argument: It seems James is saying, "Yes, you believe correctly that there is one God, but do you know that even the demons believe, and they believe with fear and trembling?" The term "demons" here in English is translated as "devils," which is plural. They are the followers of Satan. In a previous age, Satan was originally an archangel, so of course, Satan knows God. These demons who follow Satan also believe in God, but they do not obey God. They continue to do evil, oppose God, and are enemies of God. They also know that when the time is fulfilled, they will be judged by God, so they believe with fear and trembling. Here, James boldly compares faith without works to the faith of demons. At first glance, you might think you are not as bad.

But we must understand that even though we are saints saved by grace, our spirits are regenerated, our souls are undergoing sanctification, but sin still dwells in our flesh. Whenever sin reigns in us, we become followers of Satan. So, James' analogy is absolutely correct. When you do not have the testimony of good works in your life, it means your faith is dead, and your spiritual life has stagnated. At this time, your carnal life will rise, and you will become a captive of sin.

James mentions here that even the demons believe and tremble. This statement also implies another layer of meaning: simply believing in God is not enough to obtain salvation because the demons also believe, yet they continue to oppose God. Therefore, merely believing in God is insufficient; you must believe in Jesus Christ. In John 14:6, "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" Jesus is the only way, so holy and glorious. We, as sinners, cannot stand before God; we must go through Jesus, the only way.

Jesus bore our sins on the cross, and under the covering of the precious blood of Jesus Christ, God justifies us. Only then do we have the position to come before God. When Jesus was on the cross, the Father placed the sins of all people on Him. Hebrews 2:14 says, "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil." Jesus took on flesh and blood to, through His death, destroy the devil who had the power of death. Jesus had to take on flesh and blood to bear the sins of all people and to destroy the demons.

During His ministry on earth, Jesus was the Son of God and also the Son of Man. It is very unique that whenever He cast out demons, the demons called Him the Son of God, but Jesus did not accept the testimony of the demons and always stood in the position of the Son of Man. The demons do not fear Jesus as the Son of God; they fear Jesus as the Son of Man. Because Jesus Christ, through His flesh and blood, would destroy the devil who had the power of death.

The devil tempted Jesus several times, trying to make Him leave the position of the Son of Man, but Jesus always insisted on standing in the position of the Son of Man to face the devil. On the cross, Jesus set the first example of judging the devil in the identity of a man. And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:3, "Do you not know that we shall judge angels?" When Christ returns, we will also judge the angels, meaning those fallen angels.

Verse 20: "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?"

The word "foolish" here in English is translated as "empty" or "vain," meaning something hollow or without value. The NIV translates it as "foolish" or "senseless." James revisits his previously stated conclusion that faith without works is dead. At this point, he reminds those who are empty, hollow, and foolish once again: since you are already saved by grace, you should continue moving forward to attain the salvation of your soul, living a life full of virtue through active faith. If you cannot live out a good testimony, it indicates that your faith is dead.

Following this, from verses 22 to 26, James uses two examples from the Old Testament ancestors, Abraham and Rahab the harlot, to illustrate that faith must be accompanied by works and that faith without works is dead. Today, we will start on this topic and delve into the details of these examples tomorrow.

Verse 21: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?"

The story of Abraham offering Isaac is a well-known passage. This event occurs in Genesis 22, when Abraham was about 115 years old. James argues that Abraham's act of offering Isaac demonstrates that he was justified by works. However, Paul seems to say the opposite in Romans 4:2-3, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'" Paul says that Abraham was not justified by works.

Paul uses another significant event in Abraham's life to prove that he was justified by faith. That event occurred in Genesis 12. When Abraham was 75 years old, he entered the Promised Land and was blessed by God, who said that his descendants would become a great nation and all nations would be blessed through him. However, Abraham had no children at that time. In his journey to receive an heir, Abraham experienced a long period of waiting. He first hoped in his nephew Lot, who later left him. Then he hoped in his capable servant Eliezer. But in Genesis 15:5-6, God took Abraham outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." At that time, Abraham had no children, but God promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Abraham simply believed, and God counted it to him as righteousness. Thus, Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith, and Paul's statement is supported by direct biblical evidence.

When God justified Abraham, he was about 80 years old. From age 80 to 115, over 35 years, Abraham went through many experiences. Clearly, Paul's statement that Abraham was justified by faith refers to positional justification, which means he was justified before God the moment he truly believed in God's promise of an heir. However, Abraham's faith had not yet been tested, and over the next 35 years, God gave Abraham many trials to perfect his faith.

First, when he was 86, he became impatient and acted according to the flesh, having a son, Ishmael, with his maidservant Hagar. In this matter, Abraham failed the test completely. Therefore, God did not appear to Abraham for 13 years, which was a period of faith training for Abraham. When Abraham was 99, God appeared to him again and established the covenant of circumcision, requiring Abraham to remove the flesh. In the same year, God visited Abraham as a friend and accepted his hospitality. In this intimate relationship, God foretold that Abraham would have Isaac the following year.

At this point, Abraham was already old, and his wife Sarah had ceased to be able to bear children. It was in this hopeless external situation that Abraham began to believe in God. As a result, when Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah bore him a son, named Isaac. God's promises to Abraham were all invested in Isaac because, at the age of 105, God asked Abraham to send away Hagar, the maidservant, along with his son Ishmael, who was born of the flesh. At this point, Isaac became the only hope and bearer of God's promise.

Then, when Abraham was about 115 years old, God asked Abraham to offer Isaac up as a sacrifice. Genesis 22:1 says that God tested Abraham. Regarding this matter, James says that Abraham was justified by works, because by this time, Abraham's life was highly matured, and his soul had been transformed. At this point, his faith had reached a level where he could offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Even though Isaac was the result of God's promise, and all future promises from God, such as his descendants being as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky; his offspring becoming a great nation, and all nations being blessed through him; Isaac was the foundation for all these promises. If Isaac was offered, how would God's promises be fulfilled?

Abraham did not know, but he felt he didn't need to know, because God is faithful, and God would naturally fulfill His promises. How God would do it was not something Abraham needed to know. Therefore, Abraham did not bargain with God; he didn't even tell Sarah or inform Isaac in advance. Even when he was taking Isaac to Mount Moriah and Isaac asked him, "We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham did not directly answer but said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:7-8). When they reached Mount Moriah, Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, and bound Isaac, laying him on the wood. Abraham then stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. At that moment, the angel of the Lord appeared and stopped Abraham from killing Isaac and provided a ram to replace Isaac as the sacrifice. Through his actions, Abraham demonstrated his faith, so James says he was justified by works.

The justification James speaks of is a dispositional justification, an actualized justification. One could also say that Abraham had been transformed; he had become mature and righteous. He had the faith to testify to others. The justification Paul speaks of is positional justification, referring to our being saved by grace, which is a matter of the spirit. James speaks of justification by faith as a dispositional justification, which involves the sanctification of our soul. May God grant us wisdom to understand the difference between these concepts.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You! Through the book of James, we are reminded once again that after being saved by grace, we must continue to move forward, living a life full of virtue in faith so that our souls may be saved. Faith without works is dead. May we all accept this reminder and examine our lives. If there is no good testimony in our lives, it indicates that our faith lacks effectiveness and cannot supply the abundance of the spirit to our souls. Have mercy on us, so that we can accept this reminder, examine where our conscience has been compromised, and once again, through the precious blood of Jesus Christ, have our sins forgiven, remove the guilt from our conscience, and regain a lively faith to live a life full of testimony. Bless my daily life. We pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.