

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 5: CONVERSION — REPENTANCE AND FAITH

The Soul's First Conscious Response to Sovereign Grace

Lesson 15

The Relationship Between Faith and Works

James and Paul — Contradiction or Complementarity?

Faith Alone Justifies, but the Faith That Justifies Is Never Alone

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love”

Key Texts: Romans 3:28; James 2:14–26; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 2:11–14; Hebrews 11:1–40

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”

Romans 3:28, NASB 1995

“You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

James 2:24, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Few apparent contradictions in the New Testament have generated more theological controversy, more historical conflict, or more pastoral confusion than the juxtaposition of Paul and James on the question of justification. Paul declares with apostolic authority: “A man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28, NASB 1995). James declares with equal apostolic authority: “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24, NASB 1995). The two statements appear, on the surface, to be diametrically opposed, one excluding works from justification with the language of “apart from,” the other requiring works for justification with the language of “not by faith alone.” If both are the inspired Word of God, and if both are addressing the same question in the same sense, they cannot both be true. Something must give.

The resolution of this apparent contradiction has been among the most important tasks of New Testament theology since the Reformation, and the most famous failed resolution was Martin Luther’s early instinct to question the canonical status of the letter of James, an instinct he fortunately did not act upon in his final canonical judgments. The better and more exegetically defensible resolution is not to question the canonical status of either text but to recognize that Paul and James are not answering the same question, addressing the same opponent, or using the word “justified” in the same sense. When the different questions, different opponents, and different senses of “justification” are properly identified, the apparent contradiction dissolves, and what emerges in its place is not a compromise but a complementarity, two apostolic perspectives on the same gospel that, held together, constitute the full and complete apostolic account of faith, works, and salvation.

This lesson, which concludes Unit 5 on conversion and serves as the bridge to Unit 6 on justification, will develop the resolution of the James/Paul tension in six major sections: the statement of the apparent contradiction and its historical significance; Paul’s question and his opponents (the legalists who were adding works to faith as the ground of justification); James’s question and his opponents (the antinomians who claimed faith without showing its fruits); the different senses of “justification” in Paul and James; the tree-and-fruit analogy as the organizing image of the resolution; and the pastoral applications, both the diagnostic use of the works-evidence for the genuinely anxious believer and the direction to run to Christ rather than to works when the conscience accuses. The governing conviction throughout is Calvin’s own: “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”

A note on the historical and hermeneutical stakes of this question. The Roman Catholic tradition has used the apparent tension between Paul and James as evidence that the Reformation’s *sola fide* is an exegetically untenable reading of the New Testament’s full testimony: if James says justification is not by faith alone, then the Reformers’ insistence on *sola fide* contradicts an inspired apostle. The Reformation response, and the response that this lesson will develop, is that the Roman Catholic reading misunderstands what both Paul and James are doing, treating them as if they were answering the same question when they are in fact answering different questions. James’s denial of “faith alone” is a denial of the claim that a person who has claimed faith but shown no fruits of it has the kind of faith that saves. It is not a denial of Paul’s claim that the justified sinner’s standing before God is grounded in Christ’s righteousness received by faith rather than in her own meritorious obedience. The Roman Catholic reading conflates two distinct questions; the Reformed resolution distinguishes them.

This lesson also marks the transition from Unit 5 (conversion) to Unit 6 (justification). The conversion that Lessons 13 and 14 described, repentance and faith as the Spirit’s gift and the sinner’s first conscious turning to God in

Christ, is the experiential side of what Unit 6 will examine from the divine legal side: justification, the declaration of the divine Judge that the believing sinner is righteous in His sight on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness. The relationship between faith and works that this lesson addresses is therefore not merely an interesting exegetical puzzle but the boundary marker of the gospel itself: it establishes that works belong in the Christian life not as the ground of justification but as its necessary and certain fruit, not as the cause of the believer's acceptance but as the evidence of the faith through which that acceptance was received.

I. The Apparent Contradiction Stated

The Two Apostolic Declarations and Their Historical Weight

A. *The Surface Conflict*

The surface conflict between Paul and James on justification is not a minor quibble about peripheral matters; it concerns the most central question of the gospel: how is a sinful human being made right with the holy God? Paul's answer, developed at greatest length in Romans and Galatians but present throughout his letters, is that a person is justified by faith alone, apart from works, on the basis of Christ's righteousness imputed to the believer through the instrument of faith. James's answer, stated with equal clarity in James 2:14–26, is that faith without works is dead, that Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac, and that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

The apparent force of the contradiction is intensified by the fact that both apostles use Abraham as their primary illustration, and appear to use him to prove opposite points. Paul, in Romans 4:1–3, cites Genesis 15:6 (“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”) as evidence that Abraham was justified by faith, not by works, before his circumcision and before the law. James, in James 2:21–23, cites the same Genesis 15:6 text alongside Genesis 22 (the offering of Isaac) as evidence that Abraham was justified by works and that his faith was “perfected” by his works. Same patriarch, same scripture, apparently opposite conclusions, the exegetical challenge could hardly be more pointed.

Luther's famous instinct was to question the canonical standing of James, dismissing it as an “epistle of straw” in contrast to the great epistles of Paul that proclaim the gospel with clarity. But this instinct, however understandable in the heat of the Reformation's battle for sola fide, was mistaken as exegesis and unnecessary as theology. The resolution does not require the suppression of either text; it requires the recognition that the two texts are doing different theological work in response to different theological problems, and that when the different work each is doing is properly understood, they are not in conflict at all but are the complementary apostolic voices of the single gospel.

B. *The Historical Stakes*

The historical stakes of the James/Paul question extend beyond the academic exegetical puzzle and into the most practical dimensions of Christian life and pastoral care. Every generation of Christians faces the twin temptations that Paul and James are respectively opposing: the temptation of legalism (adding works to faith as the ground of acceptance before God, thereby corrupting the gospel of grace) and the temptation of antinomianism (claiming faith without its fruits, thereby reducing the gospel of grace to a license for moral indolence). The church that solves the problem by emphasizing Paul against James will tend toward antinomianism; the church that solves the problem by emphasizing James against Paul will tend toward legalism. The church that holds both together, that learns from each apostle the answer to each apostle's specific question, will have both the gospel's radical grace and the gospel's demanding holiness in their proper relationship.

The Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Roman Catholic Church's formal response to the Reformation, invoked James 2 extensively as evidence that justification requires both faith and works, that love and obedience are

necessary causes of the justified standing, and that the Reformation's sola fide was a theological innovation contradicted by the apostolic testimony. Calvin's Antidote to the Council of Trent provides the Reformation's response, including the formula that this lesson will treat as its governing declaration: "It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone." This formula is not a diplomatic compromise between Paul and James; it is the full and faithful reception of both, holding the sola of sola fide inviolate while acknowledging the inseparability of genuine justifying faith from the works that are its necessary fruit.

II. Paul's Question and His Opponents

Justification Before God: The Ground of Acceptance

A. *What Question Is Paul Answering?*

The key to resolving the James/Paul tension is identifying the specific question that each apostle is answering, because the same word, "justification", can be used in different senses in different contexts, and the apostles are in different contexts addressing different opponents about different concerns. Paul's primary question throughout Romans and Galatians is the question of the ground of the sinner's acceptance before the divine tribunal: how is a guilty sinner declared righteous before the holy God? What is the basis on which the Judge of all the earth pronounces the verdict of "righteous" over a person who has violated His holy law? By what ground does the sinner stand before God in a right relationship?

Paul's answer to this question is the heart of the Reformation's gospel: the sinner is declared righteous not on the basis of her own moral performance (which is always deficient) but on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness, credited to her account through the instrument of faith alone. The ground of the justified sinner's standing before God is entirely external to her, it is an alien righteousness (*iustitia aliena*, in Luther's phrase) that belongs to Christ and is received by the sinner as a gift through faith. No work, however sincere, however Spirit-empowered, however morally excellent, contributes to or completes this ground. The ground is Christ's righteousness alone.

This is the question that Romans 3:21–28, Romans 4, Galatians 2:15–21, and Philippians 3:7–9 are all answering. And in the context of that question, Paul's answer is unambiguous: "a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Romans 3:28); "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5, NASB 1995); "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16, NASB 1995). These declarations are not qualified by works in any form; the works-exclusion is absolute and categorical with respect to the question Paul is answering.

B. *Paul's Opponents: The Legalists*

Paul's exclusion of works from the ground of justification was directed at a specific and clearly identifiable set of opponents: the Judaizers (in Galatia) and the Jewish legalists (in Rome) who were insisting that works, specifically, the works of the Mosaic law, including circumcision and the other covenant identity-markers, were necessary additions to faith for justification. The Judaizers' position, reconstructed from Paul's response to it, was that Gentile believers must be circumcised and observe the Torah in order to be fully justified; faith in Christ was necessary but insufficient without the works of the law. Paul's response is the categorical exclusion of every form of works from the ground of justification: not works of the Mosaic law specifically, and not works in general.

The specific pastoral problem Paul is addressing with his *sola fide* is the problem of legalism, the addition of human religious performance to Christ's accomplished righteousness as the ground of acceptance before God. Legalism corrupts the gospel not by denying that Christ is necessary but by denying that Christ is sufficient, by insisting that Christ's righteousness plus some human contribution constitutes the ground of justification. Against this corruption, Paul's response is not moderation but the most absolute and unqualified declaration available: the sinner is justified by faith alone, apart from works, full stop. The "apart from" is as strong as Greek can make it, and it is intended to be.

Understanding Paul's opponents is essential for understanding why Paul's declaration of *sola fide* is not the same claim as the claim James is denying when he says "not by faith alone." Paul is denying that works contribute to the ground of justification; James is denying that a claimed faith without works is genuine saving faith. Paul's opponents have too many works (they want to add works to Christ's righteousness as the ground of acceptance); James's opponents have too few (they claim faith without showing any works as its fruit). The two apostles are firing at opposite targets, and the shots they fire do not hit each other.

III. James's Question and His Opponents

Justification Before the Community: The Evidence of Authentic Faith

A. What Question Is James Answering?

James's question in James 2:14–26 is categorically different from Paul's. Where Paul asks "How is a sinner declared righteous before God?", James asks "How is a genuine faith demonstrated and shown to be genuine?" Where Paul is concerned with the ground of justification (on what basis does God pronounce the verdict of righteousness), James is concerned with the evidence of justification (by what means is the genuineness of the faith that receives justification demonstrated before the community and before the watching world). The two questions are different in kind, not merely in degree.

This difference is visible in James's language from the opening verse of the disputed passage: "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" (James 2:14, NASB 1995). The critical phrase is "someone says he has faith", a claim of faith, not a demonstration of it. James's question is whether the claimed faith of someone who has no works is the genuine article. He is not asking whether a person who has genuine faith (demonstrated in works) can be justified; he is asking whether the claim of faith without the demonstration of works is a genuine claim. His answer is no: the faith that produces no works is the dead faith of verse 17, not the living faith that the Spirit produces in regeneration.

James's use of the word "justified" in 2:21 and 2:24 must be understood in its specific context. When James says that Abraham "was justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar" (v. 21, NASB 1995), he is not claiming that the offering of Isaac was the ground of Abraham's acceptance before God or that it contributed to the declaration of righteousness recorded in Genesis 15:6. He is claiming that the offering of Isaac "perfected" or "fulfilled" (Greek: *eteleiothe*) Abraham's faith (v. 22), that is, it brought Abraham's faith to its completed, fully expressed form in action. The works demonstrated that the faith was genuine; the faith was vindicated by the works before all observers as the real thing. This is a different claim from Paul's: James is saying that Abraham's

works showed his faith to be genuine; Paul is saying that Abraham's faith (not his works) was the ground of his justification before God.

B. James's Opponents: The Antinomians

Just as Paul's declaration of sola fide was directed at a specific set of opponents (the legalists who wanted to add works to faith as the ground of justification), James's insistence on the necessity of works was directed at a different and opposite set of opponents: the antinomians who were claiming faith as a religious status without showing any of the fruit that genuine faith necessarily produces. These were people who "said they had faith" (v. 14), who used the language of Christian belief, presumably thought of themselves as believers, and may well have been members of the Christian community, while their lives showed no evidence of the transformed orientation toward God, neighbor, and holiness that the Spirit's regenerating work invariably produces.

The specific illustration James uses is deliberately chosen to make the antinomian claim look as morally absurd as possible: "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?" (vv. 15–16, NASB 1995). The person who says the religiously correct thing ("Go in peace, be warmed and be filled") while doing nothing practically to address the neighbor's need has demonstrated that the religious speech is disconnected from any genuine love, genuine concern, or genuine faith. The speech without action is shown to be precisely what James calls the claimed faith without works: hollow, useless, and dead.

James's opponents are not those who believe the doctrine of justification by faith and are confident that their faith is genuine; they are those who use the language of faith as a cover for a life that shows no evidence of the new birth, no love for the neighbor, no obedience to God's commands, and no genuine transformation of the inner person. Against this specific error, James's corrective, that faith without works is dead, that genuine faith always produces works, that the claim of faith must be demonstrably real in the life of the one who claims it, is not a compromise of sola fide but its necessary complement. The faith that sola fide requires is a living faith, not a dead one; and the living faith's life is visible in the works it produces.

The contrast between Paul's opponents (legalists with too many works) and James's opponents (antinomians with too few) is the key to the whole resolution. When the opponents are properly identified, the apparent contradiction between the two apostles becomes a perfect theological complementarity: Paul's sola fide protects the gospel from the legalist corruption; James's insistence on works protects the gospel from the antinomian corruption. Together, they establish the full apostolic account of the Christian life: a life that is entirely free from the bondage of works as the ground of acceptance before God, and entirely committed to the works of love and obedience as the necessary and certain fruit of the faith through which that acceptance has been received.

IV. Different Senses of 'Justification'

Forensic Justification Before God and Vindicating Demonstration Before Others

A. The Semantic Range of 'Justify' in the New Testament

The resolution of the James/Paul tension depends crucially on recognizing that the word "justify" (Greek: *dikaioō*) is used in the New Testament with more than one sense, and that Paul and James are using it in different senses

when they make their respective declarations about justification. This is not a desperate harmonizing device invented to protect the Reformation's theology; it is a recognition of the genuine semantic range of the word in its various New Testament contexts, and it is confirmed by the different questions, different opponents, and different contextual emphases of the two apostles.

In Paul's usage, *dikaioō* overwhelmingly carries the forensic or declarative sense: to pronounce righteous, to declare a verdict of righteousness over a person before the divine tribunal. This is the usage established by the courtroom context of Romans 1–5, where the whole of humanity stands condemned before the divine Judge (1:18–3:20), and where justification is the divine pronouncement that resolves the sinner's otherwise hopeless legal situation (3:21–28). Paul's justification is a declaration, not a transformation: God does not make the sinner actually righteous in her own person by the act of justification; He pronounces her righteous on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ. This is a legal verdict, not a moral process.

In James's usage, *dikaioō* carries a vindicating or demonstrative sense: to show to be righteous, to demonstrate or vindicate the genuineness of a person's righteousness before human observers. This is the sense in which the word functions in James 2:21–24: Abraham was "justified", shown to be genuinely faithful, vindicated in his claim of faith, when his works demonstrated the reality of what he had claimed. This usage of "justify" is not foreign to the New Testament; it appears in Matthew 11:19 ("wisdom is justified by her deeds", NASB 1995, wisdom is vindicated or demonstrated to be genuine by its results) and in Luke 7:35 (the same idiom). The sense is demonstrative rather than forensic: the justification James speaks of is not the pronouncement of the divine verdict but the visible vindication before human observers that genuine faith has actually occurred.

B. Abraham and the Two Texts

The use of Abraham as the primary illustration by both apostles, and the apparent conflict between their uses of Genesis 15:6, can now be resolved with exegetical precision. Paul cites Genesis 15:6 ("Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness") in its original chronological context: the event recorded in Genesis 15 occurred before Abraham's circumcision and centuries before the Mosaic law. Paul's point is that Abraham's justification before God was based on his faith, not on works, and that this was true before the very covenantal rites (circumcision) and legal system (Torah) that his opponents were insisting were necessary for justification. The Genesis 15:6 text demolishes the legalist position from within the Old Testament itself.

James cites Genesis 15:6 in the context of Genesis 22, the offering of Isaac, which occurred decades after Genesis 15. James's point is that the faith credited as righteousness in Genesis 15 was shown to be genuine faith, vindicated, perfected, demonstrated, in the costly act of obedience recorded in Genesis 22. The works did not produce the righteousness that Genesis 15:6 records; they demonstrated that the faith of Genesis 15:6 was the living, active, genuine article rather than an empty profession. This is what James means when he says the faith "was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected" (v. 22, NASB 1995): the works expressed and completed the faith's visible reality, not its forensic standing before God.

The two apostolic uses of Abraham's story are therefore not in conflict; they are the two perspectives of the same story read from different angles. Paul reads Genesis 15 as the record of a divine forensic declaration: Abraham believed and God credited righteousness to his account, justification before God, by faith, apart from works. James reads Genesis 22 (in light of Genesis 15:6) as the record of a human vindicating demonstration: Abraham's works showed that his faith was real, justification before observers, by works that expressed the genuine faith within.

One event, the same Genesis 15:6 text, is being read by two apostles from two different perspectival angles, and the two readings are not contradictory but complementary.

V. The Tree and Fruit Analogy

The Necessary Relationship Between Genuine Faith and Good Works

A. The Organising Analogy

The most illuminating analogy for the relationship between faith and works in the apostolic account is the relationship between a living tree and its fruit. A living tree necessarily produces fruit, not because the fruit makes it alive, but because the life within it inevitably expresses itself in the fruit it bears. A dead tree produces no fruit, not because it has chosen to be unproductive, but because it has no life to express. The presence of fruit demonstrates that the tree is alive; the absence of fruit proves the tree is dead. But it is the life in the tree that produces the fruit; the fruit does not produce the life.

Applied to the faith-works relationship: genuine faith (the life of the tree) necessarily produces works (the fruit), not because the works make the faith genuine, but because the living faith that regeneration produces inevitably expresses itself in the works of love and obedience. Dead faith (the claimed faith without life) produces no works, not because it has chosen to be unproductive, but because it has no genuine spiritual life to express. The presence of works demonstrates that the faith is genuine; the absence of works proves the faith is dead. But it is the faith that produces the works; the works do not produce or supplement the faith's justifying power.

This analogy perfectly captures the apostolic complementarity. Paul's point: the fruit does not make the tree alive; works do not produce, merit, or supplement the faith's justifying power. James's point: the absence of fruit proves the tree is dead; the absence of works proves the claimed faith is not genuine living faith. Both points are true, and they are true simultaneously of the same relationship. The Reformation formula captures both: "Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is not alone." Faith alone justifies, Paul's point. The faith that justifies is not alone, James's point. The formula is not a compromise but the full truth of both apostles received together.

B. Ephesians 2:8–10 as the Canonical Summary

Ephesians 2:8–10 remains the most structurally precise single passage in the New Testament for the relationship between faith, works, and justification, and it deserves to be read in its full three-verse scope at this point in the lesson. Verse 8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith." The salvation is by grace (not by works), through faith (not on account of faith). Verse 9: "not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." The works are explicitly excluded as the ground of salvation, Paul's point, the *sola* of *sola fide*. Verse 10: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." The good works that verse 9 excluded as the ground of salvation are the purpose of the new creation described in verses 8–9, James's point, the inseparability of genuine living faith from the works it produces.

The structural logic of Ephesians 2:8–10 is precisely the tree-and-fruit logic: the new creation is accomplished by grace through faith (vv. 8–9); the new creation's purpose is the good works God has prepared for it to walk in (v. 10). The works follow from the new creation; they do not constitute or supplement it. But the new creation is not complete without the works, not in the sense that the works add to the justification that verses 8–9 describe, but

in the sense that the new creation that was accomplished in justification was accomplished for the purpose of the good works that verse 10 describes. The trajectory is grace → faith → new creation → good works. The arrow goes in one direction only; works are downstream of grace and faith, never upstream of them.

Titus 2:11–14 provides the Pauline complement with a specifically motivational dimension: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (NASB 1995). The grace that saves (v. 11) is the same grace that instructs toward righteous living (v. 12) and that redeems a people zealous for good deeds (v. 14). The salvation is by grace; the godly life is the instruction of the same grace; and the good deeds are the purpose of the redemption, a purpose as sovereign and as certain as the redemption itself.

VI. The Pastoral Application

The Diagnostic, the Warning, and the Gospel Direction

A. *The Diagnostic Use of Works*

The relationship between faith and works as the tree-and-fruit relationship has a direct and practically important pastoral application: works serve as the diagnostic evidence of genuine faith, not its cause. This is the point that James makes in his strongest terms (the absence of works proves the faith is dead) and that 1 John develops across the whole of the letter (the evidences of regeneration, faith, love for the brethren, practice of righteousness, overcoming of the world, are the fruit that demonstrates the reality of the new birth). Works do not justify; they evidence the genuineness of the faith that justifies.

The practical diagnostic force of this principle is that the person who claims faith but shows no fruit has cause to question whether the faith she claims is the living faith that regeneration produces or the dead faith of James 2:17 that is a claim without a reality. This is not a comfortable diagnostic, and it is one that must be applied with all the pastoral sensitivity and theological precision that James himself brings to it, not as a weapon to bludgeon the anxious but as a searchlight to help the examining soul see its own spiritual state clearly. The goal of the diagnostic is not to produce despair but to produce honest self-examination that leads either to the assurance of genuine fruit recognized or to the earnest seeking of the Spirit’s regenerating work.

It is equally important to note what the diagnostic does not say. It does not say that the person whose works are imperfect, inconsistent, or less visible than she would like has cause to doubt the genuineness of her faith. Genuine faith produces genuine works, but the works of the genuinely regenerate are always imperfect in the present age, they are the works of a person who is simultaneously justified and being sanctified, who has the new nature but not yet the glorified nature. The diagnostic is not “Do you have perfect works?” but “Do you have genuine directional movement toward God and holiness, however imperfect and inconsistent its expression?” The tree with the diseased fruit is not a dead tree; it is a living tree in need of the pruning and cultivation that the Father as the vinedresser provides (John 15:1–2).

B. *When the Conscience Accuses: Run to Christ, Not to Works*

The second and most pastorally urgent application of the faith-works relationship addresses the believer whose conscience is accusing her, who is not complacent about the apparent absence of works but is instead deeply troubled by what she perceives as her inadequate obedience, insufficient love, and inconsistent fruit. For this person, the tree-and-fruit diagnostic is not a tool of pastoral care but a source of spiritual torment: she has examined her fruit, found it wanting, and concluded that her faith must therefore be insufficient or her justification uncertain.

For this person, the pastoral word is not more examination but the decisive direction away from her works and toward the Christ who is the ground of her acceptance. This is the direction that Calvin consistently gave to the anxious soul, and that Lesson 14 developed in its account of the object of faith as the source of its saving power: do not look to the quality of your obedience to determine the security of your standing before God; look to the sufficiency of the One who is your standing before God. The ground of justification is not your works, however genuine; it is Christ's righteousness, however alien. The evidence of your faith's genuineness may include your works, but the security of your justification does not rest on them, it rests on the One who bore your sin and gives you His righteousness.

This does not mean that the conscience's accusation is always mistaken and should always be silenced by an appeal to Christ. Sometimes the accusation of the conscience is the Holy Spirit's legitimate work of conviction, pointing to a specific sin or a specific pattern of disobedience that requires genuine repentance rather than a mere doctrinal reassurance. The pastorally wise response distinguishes between the two: the conscience that accuses correctly should be heard and responded to with genuine repentance (Lesson 13's domain); the conscience that accuses hyperactively, producing a generalized guilt disconnected from specific sins and unresponsive to genuine repentance, should be directed away from itself and toward the Christ who is the ground of the believer's complete and irrevocable acceptance before God.

The Luther-esque resolution to the guilty conscience, "When the devil throws up my sins and says I deserve death and hell, I tell him: I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God. Where He is, there I shall also be.", is the proper direction for the conscientious believer whose conscience is accusing her beyond what her specific sins warrant. The works are the evidence of the faith's genuineness; the faith's security is in Christ, not in the works. And the God who has declared the believing sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness has not conditioned that declaration on the quality of the believer's subsequent performance. The verdict was pronounced once and stands forever, on a ground that neither the believer's failures nor the devil's accusations can move.

"It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone."

John Calvin, Antidote to the Council of Trent

VII. Hebrews 11 and the Unity of the Apostolic Testimony

The Faith That Acts Is the Faith That Saves

A. Hebrews 11 as the Bridge

Hebrews 11, the great roll call of the faithful, is the New Testament's most extended meditation on the nature of genuine saving faith, and it serves as the canonical bridge between Paul's insistence on faith as the instrument of justification and James's insistence on works as the evidence of genuine faith. In Hebrews 11, faith and works are not presented as two separate realities in tension with each other; they are presented as the single reality of genuine trust in God's promises as it necessarily expresses itself in costly, risk-bearing, obedience-producing action.

Every example in Hebrews 11 demonstrates the same pattern: genuine faith in a specific divine promise produces a specific, costly, visible action. Abel offered a better sacrifice (v. 4). Noah built an ark (v. 7). Abraham went out, not knowing where he was going (v. 8). Moses chose to share the mistreatment of the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin (v. 25). Rahab received the spies in peace (v. 31). The faith in each case is not merely intellectual or emotional; it is action-producing. The actions are not the ground of the faith's saving power; they are the inevitable and necessary expression of the faith's vital reality. This is exactly the tree-and-fruit logic of the James/Paul resolution: the faith produces the works; the works demonstrate the faith's genuineness; but the ground of justification is the faith's reception of the divine promise, not the works that express that reception.

Hebrews 11:1 provides the celebrated definition that grounds the entire chapter: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (NASB 1995). The "assurance of things hoped for" and the "conviction of things not seen" are not passive states of religious feeling but active orientations of the whole person toward the God who has promised. The faith that is the assurance of things hoped for acts in the present on the basis of what has been promised for the future; it is this future-oriented, promise-trusting, action-producing character of faith that Hebrews 11 illustrates across the sweep of the Old Testament's redemptive history. The faith of Hebrews 11 is neither the dead faith of James's opponents (a claimed belief without the life that produces action) nor the merit-seeking works-righteousness of Paul's opponents (a performance-based earning of divine acceptance). It is the living faith that receives the divine promise and acts on it, the faith that justifies and the faith that works, held together in the undivided reality of genuine trust in the God who has spoken.

B. Galatians 5:6 and the Formula That Holds It All Together

The lesson's final section returns to the single Pauline verse that most perfectly captures the resolution of the James/Paul tension and the full apostolic account of the faith-works relationship: Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (NASB 1995). The verse appears in the context of Paul's most thoroughgoing defense of sola fide (Galatians 1–4) and his most direct treatment of the life of the Spirit-led believer (Galatians 5–6). In this context, the "faith working through love" is Paul's description of the kind of faith that matters in Christ Jesus, and it is a description that holds both apostolic imperatives together in a single phrase.

The faith that Paul has been defending throughout Galatians is the faith that alone justifies, the faith through which the righteousness of Christ is received and by which alone the sinner stands before God. But this faith, the same faith that justifies by grace, is also a faith that "works through love." It is a living faith, not a dead one; it is a faith that moves, acts, serves, and loves; it is a faith that expresses itself in the specific, visible, concrete works of love that James demands as the evidence of genuine faith. The faith that justifies and the faith that works are not two different kinds of faith; they are the same faith viewed from two different angles. Paul views it from the angle of its judicial efficacy (it justifies, by grace, apart from works). James views it from the angle of its vital reality (it

produces works, as the living thing it is). Galatians 5:6 captures both in a single phrase: the faith that works through love is the faith that justifies by grace.

This is the full apostolic account of the Christian life: justified by faith alone, living by the faith that works through love. The two poles of the Christian existence are not in tension; they are the two essential dimensions of the single life of union with Christ through the Spirit, the forensic dimension (completely accepted by God on the basis of an alien righteousness received by faith alone) and the vital dimension (genuinely transformed by the Spirit and progressively expressing that transformation in the works of love and holiness). The person who has received both dimensions of the apostolic testimony has received the gospel in its full integrity: a gospel that declares the sinner completely free from the burden of self-justifying works while completely committed to the works of the love and obedience that are the necessary and joyful fruit of the faith through which that freedom was received.

Theological Terms and Definitions

Antinomianism	From the Greek anti (against) and nomos (law): the theological error that claims the freedom of the gospel from the law means freedom from moral obligation, that the justified person's acceptance before God through Christ's righteousness releases her from any genuine obligation to obey God's commands or bear the fruit of the new life. James's opponents in James 2:14–26 represent an antinomian error: they claim faith while showing no works. The Reformation formula guards against antinomianism while maintaining sola fide: "faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone." True gospel freedom is freedom from the bondage of self-justifying works, not freedom from the grateful obedience of the redeemed.
Legalism	The theological error that grounds acceptance before God in human moral performance, whether by adding works to Christ's righteousness as the ground of justification (the Judaizers' error Paul opposed in Galatians) or by treating obedience as the primary means by which the believer maintains her justified standing before God. Legalism corrupts the gospel not by denying that Christ is necessary but by denying that Christ is sufficient, insisting that Christ's righteousness plus some human contribution constitutes the ground of acceptance. Paul's sola fide is directed at legalism: justification is by faith alone, apart from works, so that no one may boast.
Forensic Justification	The Pauline account of justification as a legal, declarative act of God, a pronouncement of the divine verdict over the believing sinner that she is righteous in God's sight on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness. Forensic justification is a declaration, not a transformation: God does not make the sinner actually righteous in her own person by the act of justification (that is sanctification); He pronounces her righteous on the basis of an alien righteousness credited to her account. The forensic character of justification preserves the complete sufficiency of Christ's work and the complete freedom of the justified sinner from the burden of self-achieved righteousness.
Vindicating Justification	James's use of "justify" (dikaioō) in James 2:21–24 in the demonstrative or vindicating sense: to show to be righteous, to vindicate the genuineness of a person's faith before human observers. When James says Abraham was "justified by works," he means Abraham's works demonstrated and vindicated the genuineness of his faith, they showed that the faith credited as righteousness in Genesis 15:6 was living, active, and real. This sense of "justify" is not foreign to the New Testament (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:35) and is distinct from Paul's forensic sense, establishing that the two apostles are using the word in different senses to make complementary rather than contradictory points.
Dead Faith	The spurious "faith" of James 2:17, a verbal claim to believe that produces no works, love, or obedience. James's analogy: as a body without the spirit is a corpse, faith without works is spiritually dead. Dead faith has the form of faith (the claim) without its vital reality (the life that the Spirit produces in regeneration). Dead faith does not save, not because genuine faith plus works saves, but because the "faith" that produces no works is not the genuine, living, Spirit-produced faith that the Reformation's sola fide defends. The Reformed resolution: sola fide is not the doctrine that dead faith saves; it is the doctrine that genuine, living, working faith alone (not faith plus works) is the instrument of justification.
Living Faith	The genuine, Spirit-produced, action-generating trust in Jesus Christ that the Reformation's sola fide defends as the instrument of justification, a faith that is alive with the life of the new nature that the Spirit has implanted, and that therefore inevitably produces the works of love and obedience that are the fruit of that life. Living faith is the faith of Hebrews 11 (which always acted on the divine promises) and the "faith working through love" of Galatians 5:6. It justifies alone (no work contributes to its justifying power), and it is never alone (it always

	produces the fruit of the new life). Living faith is to dead faith as a living tree is to a dead one: the same form, but one with life and the other without.
Dikaioō	Greek: to justify, to declare or pronounce righteous, to vindicate. Used in the New Testament in two primary senses: (1) the forensic or declarative sense (to pronounce the divine verdict of righteousness over a person, Paul's primary usage in Romans and Galatians); and (2) the demonstrative or vindicating sense (to show or demonstrate that a person is righteous, to vindicate a claim, James's usage in James 2:21, 24, and the idiom of Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:35). The resolution of the James/Paul tension depends on recognizing that the two apostles are using dikaioō in these different senses in response to different questions and different opponents.
Titus 2:11–14	A Pauline passage that captures the inseparability of grace-based salvation and good-works-producing instruction: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness... who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." The grace that saves (v. 11) is the same grace that instructs toward righteous living (v. 12) and the redemption that occurred in order to purify a people zealous for good deeds (v. 14). Grace → salvation → instruction in godliness → good deeds: the arrow runs in one direction only, with works always downstream of grace and never upstream of it.
Iustitia Aliena	Latin: "alien righteousness." Luther's term for the righteousness that justifies, a righteousness that is foreign to the believer (it is not produced by her own moral performance) and belongs inherently to Christ (it is His perfect obedience credited to her account by faith). The alien character of the righteousness is essential to the gospel: it establishes that the sinner's standing before God does not depend on the quality of her own performance but on the perfection of Another's. Works flowing from the new nature are the believer's own genuine obedience; they are not alien. But the righteousness that grounds her justification is entirely alien, entirely Christ's, received by her only as the gracious gift of imputation through faith.
Council of Trent	The Roman Catholic Church's formal response to the Protestant Reformation (1545–1563), which condemned the Reformation's sola fide and insisted on a doctrine of justification in which both faith and works (specifically, love and meritorious deeds) are necessary causes of the justified standing before God. The Council of Trent used James 2:24 as evidence that sola fide contradicts apostolic teaching. Calvin's Antidote to the Council of Trent provides the Reformation's response, including the formula: "It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone." The Council's condemnation of sola fide remains in force in official Roman Catholic teaching.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that Paul and James are not contradicting each other, and we must believe this not as a harmonizing concession that protects our preferred theology against a difficult text but as the exegetically careful reading of what each apostle is actually doing. Paul is excluding works from the ground of justification (addressing legalists who wanted to add works to Christ's righteousness). James is requiring works as the evidence of genuine faith (addressing antinomians who claimed faith without showing its fruits). Both are right about their respective claims; neither is contradicting the other. The person who has received both properly will be simultaneously free from the burden of self-justifying works and committed to the genuine works of love and obedience that genuine faith inevitably produces.

We must believe that the Calvin formula, "faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone", is not a diplomatic compromise but the full and complete apostolic truth received without distortion. It is not a trimming of sola fide to satisfy the Roman Catholic demand for works; it is the full affirmation of sola fide (the faith alone justifies clause) together with the full acknowledgment of the inseparability of genuine faith from its works (the faith is never alone clause). The person who affirms only the first clause without the second has the Reformation's formal principle but not the Reformation's full gospel; the person who affirms only the second without the first has the counter-Reformation's moralism but not the apostolic gospel.

We must also believe that the works of the justified life are not a burden placed on the believer in order to maintain her standing before God but the divinely prepared purpose of the new creation that grace produced (Ephesians 2:10), the natural fruit of the living faith that the Spirit implanted, and the grateful expression of the love that God poured into the heart through the Spirit (Romans 5:5). Works done as the ground of acceptance are the labor of the slave; works done as the fruit of the received acceptance are the joy of the child. The difference is total, and it begins with the correct location of the ground of acceptance: in Christ's righteousness received by faith, not in one's own performance.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The emotional register that the correct understanding of the faith-works relationship should produce is the specific combination of freedom and fruitfulness that the Reformation's formula describes. Freedom: the freedom of the person who has understood that her standing before God does not rise and fall with the quality of her works, who is not trying to earn or maintain an acceptance that has already been irrevocably granted in the imputed righteousness of Christ, and who therefore brings her works to God not as the basis of her relationship but as the expression of it. Fruitfulness: the natural, Spirit-energized, love-motivated productivity of a life that has been genuinely renewed by the Spirit and that finds in the works of love and obedience not the heavy burden of self-justifying performance but the joyful expression of the new nature's deepest desires.

The person who is living under the tyranny of works as the ground of her acceptance before God, who wakes each morning to the unspoken question "Will I do well enough today?" and retires each evening to the assessment "Did I do well enough today?", has not understood the gospel that Paul preaches. The acceptance has already been secured, in full, by Christ's righteousness credited to her account through faith. The works she does today are not the payment of an ongoing debt; they are the grateful, Spirit-empowered, love-produced expression of a person

who has already been completely accepted. Let the freedom of the gospel produce in your heart the specific relief and the specific joy of a person who has laid down the impossible burden of self-achieved righteousness and taken up the easy yoke of the grateful, accepted child.

Desire the genuine fruitfulness that flows from the correct understanding of the faith-works relationship. Not the manufactured religiosity of the legalist who is performing for divine approval, not the moral indolence of the antinomian who has confused gospel freedom with freedom from all obligation, but the genuine, Spirit-produced, faith-motivated, love-expressed fruitfulness of the person who is “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10, NASB 1995). The works are prepared; the new creation is equipped; the Spirit is at work. Desire to walk in the works that God has prepared, not as the ground of your standing but as the purpose of your new creation.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Romans 3:27–4:8 and James 2:14–26 side by side, with the specific analytical purpose of identifying the different question each apostle is answering. For each passage, ask: What is the question being addressed (ground of justification, or evidence of genuine faith)? Who are the opponents being corrected (legalists who add works, or antinomians who dismiss them)? What does “justified” mean in this passage (forensic declaration before God, or vindicating demonstration before observers)? And what is the specific role of works in the argument (excluded from the ground of justification, or required as the evidence of genuine faith)? After completing the analysis of each passage separately, ask: do the two passages, read in their own contexts, actually contradict each other, or do they address complementary aspects of the same gospel?
- Read Ephesians 2:8–10 as a complete theological unit, not stopping at verse 9 as is often done in popular citation. Note the structure: verses 8–9 establish the sola fide of sola gratia (grace, through faith, not works), and verse 10 provides the teleological purpose (created for good works, which God prepared beforehand). Ask: what is the relationship between the exclusion of works in verse 9 and the purpose of works in verse 10? Does verse 10 add a condition to the salvation described in verses 8–9, or does it describe the divinely intended purpose of that salvation? How does the phrase “which God prepared beforehand” in verse 10 establish that the good works are part of the sovereign grace of salvation rather than a human supplement to it?
- Evaluate your own practice of good works against the motivation the lesson establishes. Ask honestly: when you do the works of love and obedience in your daily life, prayer, service, giving, witness, hospitality, care for the needy, are you doing them primarily as the grateful expression of an accepted child, or primarily as the anxious performance of someone trying to maintain or improve her standing before God? The first motivation is the Reformation’s account; the second is the legalism the Reformation opposed. If the second motivation is functioning more powerfully than the first, bring it specifically to the gospel: you are already fully accepted; the works are already prepared; you are already the new creation for which they were designed. Now walk in them, freely and joyfully.
- Identify someone in your pastoral or relational circle who is being spiritually harmed by either of the two errors this lesson addresses: someone who is oppressed by legalism (grounding their acceptance before God in their moral performance, living under the constant anxiety of “have I done enough?”) or someone who is living in antinomian complacency (claiming faith while showing no fruit, treating the gospel as a license for moral indolence). For the legalist: prepare a specific pastoral word grounded in the sola fide of Paul, the acceptance is complete, in Christ, already. For the antinomian: prepare a specific pastoral word

grounded in James's insistence, genuine faith always produces fruit, and the absence of fruit raises serious questions about the genuineness of the claimed faith.

- Memorize Galatians 5:6 ("faith working through love") and Calvin's formula ("Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is not alone"), and use them together as the framework for reflecting on the works of your Christian life for one week. Each evening, review the day's works of love and obedience: are they works done from faith (the expression of trust in the God who has accepted you) working through love (motivated by genuine love for God and neighbor)? Or are they works done from fear (the anxious performance of someone trying to maintain divine approval), from pride (the self-displaying religiosity of the person who wants to be seen), or from habit (the mechanical performance of religious duties disconnected from any living faith)? Let the self-examination not produce condemnation but the honest realignment of motivation that the gospel makes both necessary and possible.

Key Texts: *Romans 3:28; 4:1–8; James 2:14–26; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 2:11–14; Hebrews 11:1–40; Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:35; 1 John 2:29; 3:9, 14; 5:1–4*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, how did you hold together Paul’s “apart from works” (Romans 3:28) and James’s “not by faith alone” (James 2:24)? Did you find them genuinely contradictory, or did you have some prior sense of how they could be harmonized? What is your honest reaction to Luther’s instinct to question the canonical status of James, does it seem like the right solution to the tension, or does it seem like a failure of exegetical nerve? And what is at stake, practically and spiritually, in getting the faith-works relationship right, for your own spiritual life, for your pastoral care of others, and for the integrity of the gospel you preach?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 3:19–28. What is the specific problem that Paul is addressing in the larger context (what has been established about the human condition in 1:18–3:20)? What is the specific solution Paul announces in 3:21–26? In verse 28, what is the specific claim Paul makes, and what is the specific exclusion he makes? Who are the opponents implied by the specific claim, what would they have been insisting that Paul is denying? And how does the legal language of the passage (guilty, justified, verdict, courtroom) establish the forensic character of the justification Paul is describing?
- Read James 2:14–26. In verse 14, what specific claim does the hypothetical person make, and what specific question does James ask about that claim? Note the phrase “someone says he has faith”, what does this phrase establish about the nature of James’s concern (is he questioning genuine faith, or the claimed faith)? In verse 19, what example does James give of accurate belief without saving faith? In verses 21–23, what specific event does James cite for Abraham, and what does he say that event did to Abraham’s faith (the word translated “perfected” or “fulfilled” in v. 22)? And in verse 26, what is the analogy James uses for the relationship between faith and works?
- Read Ephesians 2:1–10. Trace the logical structure of the passage from the description of the unregenerate condition (vv. 1–3) through the divine act of saving grace (vv. 4–6) to the purpose and ground of salvation (vv. 8–9) to the purpose of the new creation (v. 10). What is the specific relationship between the exclusion of works in verse 9 and the inclusion of works in verse 10? Does verse 10 contradict verse 9 (by making works necessary after all), or does it complete verse 9 (by establishing the divinely prepared purpose for which the grace of verses 8–9 saved the new creation)? How does the passive construction of verse 10 (“which God prepared beforehand”) establish the sovereign grace character of the good works?
- Read Galatians 5:1–6. What is the specific contrast Paul draws in verses 1–6 (freedom vs. bondage, Christ vs. the law, grace vs. obligation)? In verse 6, what is the specific description Paul gives of the faith that matters in Christ Jesus? What does “working through love” add to the picture of faith that the preceding chapters have painted (faith as the instrument of justification)? And how does the phrase “working through love” establish both sola fide (faith is what matters, not circumcision) and the inseparability of genuine faith from love and works (the faith that matters works through love)?
- Read Hebrews 11:1–16. In verse 1, what is the description of faith (assurance of..., conviction of...)? In each of the specific examples (Abel, vv. 4; Noah, vv. 7; Abraham, vv. 8–12), identify (a) the specific divine promise that was the object of the faith, (b) the specific costly action that the faith produced, and (c) the specific evidence that the action was motivated by the faith rather than by visible certainty of the outcome. What

is the common pattern across all three examples? And how does the pattern of faith → costly action illuminate the relationship between Paul's faith (that justifies) and James's works (that demonstrate the faith)?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that Paul and James are not contradicting each other because they are addressing different questions, opposing different errors, and using “justified” in different senses. Evaluate the strength of this resolution. Is it exegetically defensible that *dikaioō* can mean “forensically declared righteous” in Paul and “demonstrated/vindicated as righteous” in James? What specific contextual evidence supports each sense in its respective passage? And does the different-questions approach fully resolve the tension, or is there some residual difficulty that it does not address?
- The lesson uses the tree-and-fruit analogy as the organizing image for the faith-works relationship: the fruit does not make the tree alive, but the absence of fruit proves the tree is dead. Evaluate the analogy. How accurately does it capture the relationship between genuine faith and good works? What are the limits of the analogy, where does the tree/fruit relationship differ from the faith/works relationship in theologically significant ways? And how does the analogy guard against both legalism (fruit does not make the tree alive) and antinomianism (absence of fruit proves the tree is dead)?
- The lesson presents Calvin's formula, “faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is not alone”, as the full apostolic truth received without distortion. Evaluate the formula. Does it accurately represent both Paul's emphasis (faith alone justifies) and James's emphasis (genuine faith is never alone)? Does it collapse either emphasis by holding both? And how does the formula guard against the two errors (adding works to the ground of justification; accepting faith-claims without the works that genuine faith produces)?
- The lesson argues that James's use of Abraham illustrates the vindicating/demonstrative sense of “justification,” not the forensic sense. Specifically, the lesson claims that Abraham's offering of Isaac (Genesis 22) showed that his faith from Genesis 15 was genuine, rather than establishing a new ground for his justification. Is this interpretation exegetically defensible from James 2:21–23? Specifically, how does the word “perfected” (v. 22) support the interpretation? And how does the connection between Genesis 15:6 (cited in v. 23) and the Genesis 22 event (cited in v. 21) establish that James is reading the two events as the initial declaration of righteousness and its subsequent vindication, rather than as two separate justifying events?
- The lesson's pastoral section distinguishes between the conscience that accuses correctly (pointing to a specific sin requiring genuine repentance) and the conscience that accuses hyperactively (producing generalized guilt unresponsive to repentance). This distinction has obvious practical importance, but it is also potentially dangerous, a person with a hyperactive conscience might use it as an excuse to dismiss legitimate convictions as “hyperactive.” How would a pastor or spiritual director make this distinction in practice? What specific tests distinguish the conscience's legitimate conviction (to be addressed with repentance) from its hyperactive accusation (to be addressed with the gospel direction toward Christ)?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies two opposite pastoral problems: the legalist who grounds her acceptance before God in her moral performance, and the antinomian who claims faith while living without its fruit. Evaluate your own spiritual life honestly: which of these two errors are you most inclined toward? If legalism: what specific religious performances are you most tempted to treat as the ground of your acceptance rather than as the expression of it? If antinomianism: what specific areas of your life show the least evidence of the genuine

fruit of faith, the love, obedience, and transformation that genuine faith necessarily produces? What specific aspects of the gospel address the specific error you are most inclined toward?

- The lesson closes with the Luther-esque direction for the believer whose conscience is accusing her: “When the devil throws up my sins... I tell him: I admit... What of it? For I know One who suffered...” Evaluate the pastoral wisdom of this direction. Is it a legitimate pastoral word for the believer under assault by guilt, or is it a dangerous encouragement to dismiss the conscience’s legitimate work of conviction? How do you distinguish, in your own spiritual life, between the conscience’s legitimate accusation (requiring repentance) and the assaulted conscience that needs to run to Christ rather than to its works?
- The lesson argues that works done from legalism (to earn or maintain acceptance) are spiritually and experientially different from works done as the grateful expression of received acceptance. Do you find this distinction real in your own experience, is there a qualitative difference between the two kinds of works in how they feel to do, what motivates them, and what effect they have on your relationship with God? And what specific daily or weekly practices help you to align your motivation for works with the gospel’s account of their proper ground (the already-received acceptance) and their proper fruit (the expression of the new nature’s genuine desires)?
- The lesson transitions from Unit 5 (Conversion) to Unit 6 (Justification), noting that the faith-works relationship establishes works as the fruit of the faith through which justification was received, not as the ground of justification itself. As you prepare for the unit on justification in the lessons ahead, what specific questions about justification do you most want the study to address? What specific confusions about the relationship between faith, works, and acceptance before God do you carry into the study of justification? And how does the resolution of the James/Paul tension in this lesson prepare you for a fuller understanding of what justification means and how it relates to the whole of the Christian life?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by reading Hebrews 11:1–16 slowly and meditatively, as the New Testament's most extended portrait of the faith that both justifies and acts. Let the specific examples carry their weight: Noah, who built an ark for 100 years on the basis of a divine warning about something he had never seen; Abraham, who left his homeland for a destination he did not know; Sarah, who received strength to conceive in old age because she "considered Him faithful who had promised" (v. 11). These are not examples of people who earned divine favor by their obedience; they are examples of people whose trust in the God who had spoken was so real and so specific that it produced costly, visible, world-altering action. This is the faith that justifies and the faith that works, held together in the undivided life of genuine trust.

Pray with specific thanksgiving for the grace that Paul preaches, the grace that has completely, irrevocably, and freely secured your acceptance before God on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness, received through the gift of faith. The ground of your standing before God is not your works, however genuine; it is Christ, however alien His righteousness may seem. Receive this with all the specific, personal, relief-producing force that it deserves: you are not trying to earn what has already been given; you are not working to maintain what has already been secured; you are not paying for what has already been paid. Your works flow from a ground that is already established, toward a purpose that has already been prepared, through a life that has already been created, by grace, through faith, to the praise of His glory.

Pray with specific honesty about the works of your daily life before God. Acknowledge the ways in which the works you have done have been done from the wrong motivation, from the anxious performance of the legalist rather than the joyful expression of the accepted child, from the desire to be seen rather than from love for the neighbor, from habit rather than from the living faith that works through love. Ask the Spirit to do the realigning work that only He can do: to deepen the faith that is the source of the works, to purify the love that is the motivation of the works, and to produce in you more consistently the works that are the genuine expression of the new creation God has made you in Christ.

Pray for the specific works that God has prepared for you to walk in, the works of Ephesians 2:10 that are the divinely intended purpose of the new creation you have become in Christ. You may not know all of them; you may be aware of some of them very clearly. For the ones you know: ask for the grace, the courage, and the love to walk in them faithfully, not from fear of failure but from trust in the One who prepared them and who will supply everything needed for their accomplishment. For the ones you do not yet know: ask the Spirit to make them clear, to open the opportunities, and to produce in you the discernment to recognize the works that God has prepared and the willingness to walk in them when He shows them to you.

Close with a corporate reading of Titus 2:11–14 as the summary of the grace-faith-works relationship that this lesson has established: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age... who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." The grace that saves is the grace that instructs; the redemption that occurred is the redemption for the purpose of good deeds. The arrow runs in one direction only: grace → salvation → godly instruction → good deeds. Works are downstream of grace, not upstream of it. But they are genuinely downstream, the real, Spirit-produced, love-motivated, faith-expressing fruit of the new life that grace accomplished. Let the works you

do from now on be this kind of works: not the labor of the slave trying to earn freedom, but the joyful service of the freed child expressing the love and the obedience that freedom was given for.

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”

Ephesians 2:10, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 3:28; 4:1–8; James 2:14–26; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 2:11–14; Hebrews 11:1–16; 1 John 3:9, 14; John 15:1–8; Matthew 7:15–20

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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