

Faith and Works

By Elder David Pyles

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. – Js 2:24

This scripture has commonly been misinterpreted in such ways that put it in conflict with other scriptures saying that justification is by faith alone (e.g. Rom 3:28). These misinterpretations err in that they put an improper meaning on the word “justify.” It is taken to mean “make righteous” whereas it truly means “declare righteous.” Thus, it affirms a state of righteousness that already exists. This can be clearly seen in:

He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the Lord. – Prov 17:15

Now to condemn a just man does not mean to “make” him guilty. It is to *declare* him guilty when in fact he is innocent. Even so, to “justify” a wicked man means to *declare* him righteous when he is truly unrighteous. Men in the Bible are even said to justify God (Lk 7:29), which obviously cannot mean that they make Him righteous. As a third example, consider what was said of Christ:

Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification. – Rom 4:25

All Christians know it was the death of Christ, not His resurrection, that took away our offences, but His resurrection declared the fact.

Now faith in Christ, if it is real, is sufficient of itself to declare that we are washed in the blood of Christ, and scriptures so teach in numerous places. However, faith is a thing of the heart, and is therefore unobservable to others. Fortunately, faith is also productive of good works, and this is why God gives it. It is by means of these good works that faith is known by human observers to be real. There is no reasonable doubt that such was the intended meaning when James said, “*Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.*” This interpretation is entirely

sensible, makes proper application of the word “justify,” and harmonizes all scriptures at issue.

James also said:

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. – Js 2:19

We can be sure that the belief of devils is not God-given faith because it is not productive of good. Also, while devils believe, they actually hate what they believe. Wicked men and devils don't want to believe even when they do. God's children want to believe even when they don't (Mk 9:24). This is a fundamental and radical difference that is reflective of two radically different hearts.