SERMONS

BY THE

REV. JOHN VENN, M. A.

*RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.*

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

IN THREE VOLUMES.

\_\_\_

Vol. I.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*THE THIRD EDITION.*

*­­­­*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

LONDON:

PRINTED BY ELLERTON AND HENDERSON,

JOHNSON’S COURT, FLEET STREET:

AND SOLD BY J. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY; AND

RIVINGTONS, ST. PAUL’S CHURCHYARD.

1818.

SERMON IV.

*ON GOOD WORKS.*

JAMES ii. 24.

*Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.*

YET St. Paul (Rom. iii. 28) says, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” How are these declarations, apparently so contradictory, to be reconciled?

I am far from thinking the pulpit a proper place for the discussion of religious controversies, or even for a very critical and minute inquiry into the true sense of obscure passages of Scripture: yet, when it is considered that the subject treated of in the text is one of the most important in religion; that the supposed contradiction between the two Apostles has served as an occasion of reproach to infidels, and of doubt to sincere but unestablished Christians; and that the removal of a difficulty in any doctrine, or the solution of an objection against it, often tends to give the clearest and most complete views of it; I hope I may be permitted to devote the present discourse to the subject of the text, and the reconciliation of the language of the two Apostles.

The doctrine of St. Paul, respecting justification, can scarcely be mistaken. He largely and expressly teaches, that “by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified” in the sight of God;—that “we are therefore justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus;”—that we are “saved by grace through faith,” “not of works:” that “to Him who worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness;”—and finally, that “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.”

On the contrary, the doctrine of St. James, as stated in the text, may appear to be, that it is not by our faith only, but by our works also, that we are to be justified. “Can faith,” he asks, “save a man?” “Ye see how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”

In what sense this is to be understood I shall endeavour to show; first premising two observations, which may tend to prepare us for better understanding the meaning of the Apostle James.

1. In the first place, then, it is to be observed,that the two Apostles appear to have had different objects in view in their respective declarations concerning justification. St. Paul is treating on the method by which a sinner may have his sin forgiven, and become partaker of the salvation of Christ. This the Apostle asserts to be “by faith,” in opposition to any merit of his own. He does not, therefore, take any pains to prove that this faith must be a sincere faith. This the question did not lead him to consider, and he properly assumes that the faith, to which so much is attributed, will be a true faith. The scope of his argument is, that this favour of being admitted to partake of the benefits of Christ’s redemption, was not to be considered as a just reward of any man’s merit, but only as the effect of the free grace and mercy of God. Now, was this also the intention of St. James? No—he had a distinct object in view. His object was to prove that the faith which saves a man must be a true and operative faith. The doctrine which he opposes is, not that a man will be saved by faith, but that he will be saved by a barren and useless faith. The persons of whom he is speaking, are not those spoken of by St. Paul, who have not been admitted into the church of Christ, but those who, though they have been long members of the Christian commonwealth, yet, through an insincere faith, are still living in sin.

2. I observe, secondly, that it is probable the two Apostles, in treating of this subject, *use the several principal terms in the same sense*. When they both use the word “justify,” it is not probable that they should mean two different things. Besides, they both consider the word *saved* as having the same signification with being justified. Thus St. James says, “Can faith *save* him?” And St. Paul, in the same manner, says in one place, “By grace ye are *saved* through faith, not of works;” in another, “We reckon a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” The term w*orks* appears also to have the same signification with both the Apostles. The works which St. James means are evidently moral works, for he has given an instance of them. In like manner, St. Paul says, in one place, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done;” and in another, “By the deeds or works of the law we cannot be saved, because “by the law is the knowledge of sin.” Now, it is not the ceremonial but the moral law which chiefly produces the knowledge of sin; and it is from the moral law he quotes his examples of guilt, to prove that the law condemns instead of justifying. I conclude, therefore, that both the Apostles mean the same thing by “works,” viz. works done in obedience to the moral law.

If, then, the two Apostles understood the same thing, by both the terms “justification” and “works” and if one Apostle asserts justification to be by faith, and the other by works; the question recurs, “Do they not contradict each other?” I answer: In words they may appear to do so; but then this circumstance must be taken into the account, that an author’s meaning is to be collected rather from the general sense of a passage, than from a few detached words in it. The sense of the Apostle James, as collected from the whole scope of the passage, is not doubtful; and evidently so far from being contrary to St. Paul’s idea, appears strictly to accord with it. Should there, therefore, be any detached words which appear discordant with this sense, these should be interpreted according to the sense of the whole, rather than the sense of the whole be changed to accommodate them.

Permit me, therefore, to offer a brief paraphrase and comment upon the Apostle’s words, beginning at the 14th verse, in which the subject is introduced. I would be far from asserting that the interpretation I give, is, in all points, right; or that it will in all parts, especially in the first instance, appear obviously just; but it is such as appears to me to accord with the general scope of the passage, and to be the natural deduction from the words, even though there were no desire to reconcile them with the statement of another Apostle.

The Apostle, at the beginning of this chapter, had been reproving the conduct of certain persons in the church, who despised the poor, and observed the laws of God in a partial manner. “My brethren,” says he, “hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ with respect of persons.” “If ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced,” or reproved, “by the law as transgressors.” For “whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” That is—whoever shall be partial and defective in his obedience, keeping some branches of the law, but breaking others, he is to be esteemed a transgressor of the law, although he may, in some respects, observe it. This is what introduces the subject; and the introduction may be considered as the key to the whole. The Apostle is, therefore, led to this subject by justly censuring the partial and defective obedience of some hard-hearted and proud professors of Christianity.

He then proceeds in the fourteenth verse, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith and have not works: can faith save him?”—*i.e.* Let not any Christian think his faith sufficient to justify him, without those works of justice and charity of which I have spoken. “For what doth it profit if a man say he hath faith,” *i.e.* in words profess to have faith in God or in Christ, and “have no works” to evidence the truth of that profession: can such a naked, fruitless faith save him?

Much stress is here to be laid on the expression, “if a man *say he* hath faith.” The question is not, “What doth it profit if a man hath faith and have no works;” though this might have been truly said, and understood consistently with the system of the Gospel; but the Apostle forbears to employ so strong an expression, and merely asks, “if a man *say he* hath faith —evidently meaning, that he merely *says* this, without any foundation for so saying;—can such a pretended or false faith save him?

Here then we see what it is the Apostle condemns. It is the dependence, not upon a true, but upon a false faith. He then adds, verse fifteenth,—“If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled,” *i.e.* make profession of good will towards them, but, notwithstanding, “ye give them not those things which be needful” for the clothing or feeding of the body, what doth it profit them to hear your kind words? Would it not be a mere mockery, if your pretended compassion issued only in fine words and a courteous manner towards them? Even so faith professed with the mouth, if it hath not works answerable to that profession, is dead and fruitless as these words, “being alone;” being, that is to say, unaccompanied by works to show its reality.—The illustration which the Apostle here produces of the folly of pretending to love without deeds to prove it, clearly develops his idea respecting faith. You do not condemn the quality of Christian love, because a pretender to it will suffer his brother to starve; but you justly condemn the man, and deny that he possesses this love. Even so, when a man “says he has faith,” but has no works to demonstrate it; you would not condemn faith, but this pretender to faith, and reprove him by saying, that “faith without works is dead.”

We now come to the eighteenth verse. ***“***Yea a man” (an opposer of the Christian faith, as a Jew, for instance,) “may say” to such an empty pretender to faith, Thou boastest that “thou hast faith, and I have works; show me thy faith” (to which thou pretendest) “without thy works,” if thou art able. For my part, I will prove the superiority of that faith which thou despisest; because “I will show thee my faith by my works.”

“Thou believest that there is one God. Thou (in this) dost well but if this faith has no influence upon thy conduct, what is it more than “the devils” possess? “The devils believe” in the power of God, and their faith has some influence upon them; for “they tremble.” Can thy pretended faith, which has less influence on thee than even that of the devils, save thee?

Verse 20. “But wilt thou know,” he then adds, “O vain man!” who makest profession of such a naked faith, “that faith without works is dead,” is a mere nullity? Is it therefore such a faith as this which will justify thee?

He then comes to the example of Abraham. “Was not Abraham our father justified,” not by such a lifeless fruitless faith without works as you possess, but “by” a faith which produced “works” (for such I take to be the sense of the passage, though the detached words might not seem to convey it) when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar. “Seest thou how faith wrought with his works,” to produce them, “and by works was faith made perfect?” “And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and *it* (his faith) was counted to him for righteousness, and he was called the friend of God!”

The argument respecting Abraham appears to be this:—God had promised to Abraham a son; Abraham steadfastly believed that promise, though it was most unlikely, according to human appearance, to be fulfilled. And we are told, in the Book of Genesis, that God so approved of this faith, that “he counted it to him for righteousness.”—From these words St. Paul infers, that Abraham was justified by faith; the expression, having righteousness imputed to him, being equivalent to “being justified.” And from this use of the example of Abraham, by St. Paul, against the Jews, as establishing the power of faith to justify, the argument had probably grown familiar with the Church, and might be misinterpreted by the false professor whom St. James reproves, as though it authorized his want of works.

What then is the object of St. James in producing this example of Abraham? Did he wish to contradict the Old Testament;—to contradict it also in that part which was used as an important bulwark of the Christian Church? Did he mean to assert, in contradiction to Moses, that Abraham was not justified by faith, but by his works? If he did, why quote the very Scripture which makes against him, and why speak of its being fulfilled, but upon the supposition that the object of the Apostle in the preceding verses is what I have shown it to be? There he quotes the example of Abraham, as a case full in point, to strengthen the assertion just made, that a faith not productive of works is useless or dead, and therefore will not justify. On this supposition the example he produces is important, and the declaration of Scripture in harmony with it. It is to this effect:—Abraham was justified by faith. But consider the character of his faith. Was it not so powerful and active a principle, that, under the most trying circumstances, he stood ready to sacrifice his child to God? Was he, therefore, justified by a fruitless faith? Or by a faith which produced works? “Seest thou not how his faith wrought by his works,” constraining him to produce them; and that thus his faith was completed, was rendered perfect, by his works? Thus the Scripture was fulfilled which said, “Abraham believed in God, and his faith was imputed to him for righteousness;”—and thus, on account of his faith, so manifested by works, he was called the friend of God.

The Apostle then adds, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” This is the conclusion from the case of Abraham, and can therefore mean no more than is warranted by that case. Suppose it to mean, as the words detached from the context would seem to mean, that it is not faith by which a man is justified, but works. In this case, the example of Abraham, and the quotation from Genesis, are both foreign to the purpose. In this case, there could be no occasion to particularize the kind of faith by the adverb *only,* or alone. But, on the contrary, suppose the Apostle to have the same object in view throughout; viz. to convince a false professor of the worthlessness of an empty faith; and that he quotes the. Book of Genesis, which says, that Abraham’s faith saved him, in order to strengthen his argument, and concludes from it merely what is necessary to his main object; then, we shall also interpret the last verse in conformity with the general scope of the passage. We shall conclude that the Apostle intends merely to prove, that a barren faith will not justify; that a man is justified by works, *i.e****.*** by a faith productive of works, instead of a faith which is without works or alone.

In like manner must the example of Rahab be understood. St. Paul asserts her works also to have been done by faith. And St. James maintains, that her faith was evidenced or illustrated by the acts of receiving the messengers and sending them another way.

Thus also, in consistency with the general scope of the subject, must the remaining verse be understood—“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” The expression is equivalent to that which the Apostle had previously employed with respect to faith. Faith can no more subsist without works, than the body can when the spirit is fled; than the principle of Christian love can prevail in the heart without prompting it to deeds of benevolence and affection.

Such appears to be the general meaning and object of this important passage, and such the harmony between the twoApostles.—I shall conclude with a single observation. Whatever be the difficulties discovered in this passage, one truth it most obviously teaches,—that faith, to be genuine, must produce good works. It must be a principle from which they spring, as the effect from its proper cause. Hence, then, we should surely be led to inquire into the influence which our principles have upon our conduct. What effects do they produce in us? Wherein are we more excellent than others who have no faith? What is the benefit of barren and speculative opinions? They may be just in themselves; but so is the faith of devils; that faith which serves only to plunge them in deeper perdition. Nor is this admonition of small importance. Many are more solicitous to form their creed than to purify the heart. As if the essence of religion consisted in correct opinions; as if their salvation were suspended exclusively upon a barren belief; they rest there. For this purpose they read, they listen to the Minister of the Gospel, they inquire with eager curiosity into the various sects in religion; as if some tenet were thus to be discovered, the reception of which would operate as a charm, and at once recommend them to God.—Far, indeed, is this from the true genius of Christianity. True faith is the cordial reception of the Gospel of Christ. It is inherent in the very nature of the Gospel, that whosoever really believes it will do what is right in the sight of God. The various objects of a Christian’s faith will each excite its corresponding virtues. Belief in the holiness of God will create a devout fear. A belief in the love of Christ will produce a reciprocal love to him. The reception of the Son of God as our Saviour will lead us to keep his commandments; and faith in his atonement will not only fill our souls with peace, but will lead us to adorn the Gospel, and to exalt that Saviour who is the Source of all our hope and joy. Such is the power of faith as a principle of action. It moulds us into a state of conformity with the whole will of God. It works by love: it purifies the heart: it teaches us to live to Him who died for us; to “glorify Christ with our bodies and souls, which are his.”