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THE BOOK OF JAMES - "STRAW" OR LAW?

by Ted J. Clarke

Several hundred years ago, Martin Luther, a prominent figure in the Reformation movement to change a corrupt Roman church, said that the New Testament book of James was "a strawy epistle," meaning that it was of little or no value or significance. So great was Luther's dislike for James, that he put it as the last book in his German translation, seriously questioning its inspiration.

Luther considered James of little or no value because he believed that James 2:24 actually contradicted Ephesians 2:8-9 and other writings of Paul. These verses from Paul say, "by grace ye have been saved through faith... not of works lest any man should boast." The verse in James taught, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only." While Paul seems to repeat his thought in Romans 3:28; 4:4-5 et al., James uses a lengthy section to establish his point (James 2:14-26). While most denominational teachings do not react as strongly against James as Luther, James' teaching in this part of his epistle does not get the attention it deserves.

The last few years have seen an intense renewal of the salvation and works controversy, stirring up the same kind of unsound denominational teaching that has been shown to be false in years past. Men who once taught the truth on these matters are dangerously compromising God's word and are apt to lead some souls into perdition. This article examines the teaching of Paul and James, plus the total context of the Scriptures, to see if James is "straw" or God's law, with essential teaching for us to follow. We will also look at some other approaches to James' teaching which we believe misunderstand what he intended.

What is the gist of Paul's teaching against works as related to salvation?

He consistently teaches that no one can, by his or her good works, **earn** on their own merit the right to demand that God must save him or her from sin (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5 et al.). We "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Nothing we could do could ever satisfy God's demand for justice, and therefore, we must have the grace of God, His favor upon us, which we do not deserve (Ephesians 2:1-5). God's gracious plan for saving us is seen in sending Christ to die on the cross and pay the price of atonement for our sins (Romans 5:8). Jesus' sinless life and sacrifice is the only ransom price God would accept for our sins (John 3:16; Matthew 20:28; 27:46).

While we can never accomplish what Christ did for us, God's gracious plan in offering salvation through Christ requires that we **must do** certain things before God will save us. Jesus taught early in His ministry that, "Not everyone that saith unto me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven; **but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven**" (Matthew 7:21). In John 12:48-50 Jesus pointed out that He was revealing God's will through His teaching and that of His apostles (cf. John 16:12-15). Hebrews 11:6; Acts 17:30; Romans 10:9-10; Acts 2:38 and a host of other verses show some things we **must do** before God will place us in a saved state of initial forgiveness of sins. These are a part of the works we will be judged for as stated in 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12-13; 22:12). If we have not done these things, we will be lost regardless of what Christ did for us.

As God demands that we respond in obedience to His grace in order to be saved initially, the Scriptures also teach that there are works we must do **to maintain our salvation**. Paul, who wrote against works of the law of Moses

and works of merit and boasting, told the Christians at Philippi, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). This clearly shows that there are works necessary **to remain in a state of salvation**. While we can never merit our initial salvation, neither can we merit forgiveness of sins which we commit as Christians. We must continue to depend on Christ's blood to cleanse us from our sins (1 John 1:7-10). However, God will not apply the merit of Christ's blood to our sins if we do not walk in the light and work in obedience to God's commands. "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they might have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city" (Revelation 22:14; cf. 1 John 2:3-5).

When James 2:24 says, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only," he is speaking of our working God's will in doing what God has assigned, so that we may be saved initially and also what we must do to maintain that salvation. We cannot do works to merit salvation or boast that God owes us the right to be saved. Paul rightly protests against the possibility of performing such works. However, the works James says we must have to be justified are the works which are **possible and essential for us to accomplish**. These are works which God commands us to obey in order to have access to the grace of salvation which comes through Christ. Does our performance of these works contribute to our salvation? Not in the sense of adding anything to what Christ has done, but in order to receive the benefit of Christ's work **God requires that we do these things**. If we do not contribute toward our salvation by doing these works commanded, God will not save us. Note that, "he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16); "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3); "if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus... thou shalt be saved" (Romans 10:9) [what if one does not confess?]; and "baptism doth also now save us" (1

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Peter 3:21; Mark 16:16) [what about those not baptized?]. Since these are works we must perform or God will not save us, James is right when he says that there is a real sense in which "by works a man is justified" (James 2:24). Again we state that James does not contradict Paul, as Luther thought, for Paul was speaking of different kinds of works, works of the law of Moses or works of merit and boasting (Romans 3:28-30; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Contrary to standard denominational teaching, James says that we are not saved (justified) by "faith alone." James says that faith alone is "dead" (2:17,26). "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, **and not by faith only**" (James 2:24). Salvation is a state of being justified, being declared not guilty of sin, because of the merit of Christ's blood. Even though Jesus said that faith is a work which God requires of us (John 6:28-29), James says we are not justified by "faith only." There are other works we must do to be saved, which we have enumerated above. Since so much of the religious world teaches that we are saved by faith alone and James says we are saved "**not by faith only**," it must be obvious that James teaches something valuable and essential for us to know. It is taught elsewhere, but not as clearly as in James. Therefore, James is not worthless "straw," as Luther said. Rather, James speaks of God's "perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25), and teaches us precious truths which can set us free from sin (John 8:32). [to be continued]

A Look at 1 Corinthians 7:15

by Owen D. Olbricht

When a practice or practices in any age become popular, there are always those who seek to uphold such practices. Micah wrote of one who is an audience pleaser, that if he would say, "I will prophesy unto thee of wine and strong drink; he shall even be the prophet of this people" (Micah 2:11).

Divorce and remarriage is so prevalent outside the church, and even within it, that it is no wonder that there are those who become popular because they preach and teach divorce for almost any reason, just as there were those in Micah's day who were popular and accepted as prophets of God because they preached what the people wanted to hear about wine and strong drink. One passage used to uphold divorce and remarriage is 1 Cor. 7:15.

A good discussion of this section of 1 Cor. 7 is found in the commentary written by Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament*, edited by F. F. Bruce, and printed by William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1987. Mr Fee points out that Paul's main thesis in the chapter is that Christians are to stay as they are, and then points out that Paul offers exceptions to this. The following are examples of exceptions.

- v. 1, 2 Better not to touch a woman, but marriage is an acceptable alternative.
- v. 3-5 Give sexual rights to the marriage partner, but a time of separation for prayer and fasting is permitted.
- v. 7-9 Better to remain unmarried, but get married if self-control seems impossible.
- v. 10-12 The married are not to separate, but if they do they are to remain unmarried.
- v. 13-16 The Christian is to remain with the unbeliever, but if the unbeliever wants to depart, let him depart.
- v. 21 Remain a slave as a Christian, but if you can gain freedom, do so.
- v. 25-28 Virgins and unmarried should remain unmarried, but if they marry they do not sin.
- v. 36-38 A man can keep his virgin

unmarried, but does not sin if he gives her in marriage.

- v. 39-40 A wife is bound to her husband while he lives, but if he dies, she can remarry; however, she will be happier if she remains unmarried.

The general ruling applies in all these cases, i.e. "abide as you are;" however, in each case an exception is permitted. With this in mind, in dealing with the brother or sister who has an unbelieving partner, the ruling is "abide as you are" However, a brother or sister is not bound to this general rule, if the unbelieving wants to depart.

Concerning this Mr. Fee writes, "...they are not bound to the ruling given above about maintaining the marriage. They (Christians - Ed.) have wanted to dissolve such marriages. Paul has said, 'No.' But now he allows that if the pagan wants out, then one is not enslaved."

In defense of this viewpoint that Paul is only permitting the dissolution of the marriage and not arguing for remarriage, Mr. Fee writes, (1) "In the context in which people are arguing for the right to dissolve marriage, Paul would scarcely be addressing the issue of remarriage, and certainly not in such circuitous fashion. (2) The verb 'to be under bondage' is not his ordinary one for the 'binding' character of marriage (cf. 7:39; Rom. 7:2); that means that Paul does not intend to say one is not 'bound to the marriage.' One is simply not under bondage to maintain the marriage, which the other person wishes to dissolve. From Paul's point of view, one is bound to a marriage until death breaks the bond (7:39). (3) In v. 11, even though there is a similar exception regarding divorce, he explicitly disallows remarriage."

Observations

Surely the careful reader will not have overlooked some of the implications in the above material.

1. Those who argue that "abide as you are" permits the continuance of another marriage while his former wife or her former husband lives, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the divorce and remarriage, are wrong in their conclusion. Paul gives ample evidence that the principle "abide as you are" has many exceptions and therefore would not demand the union described above. Surely, any ruling that violates

the exception Jesus gives in Matt. 19:9 is incorrect.

2. The general ruling of this section is "abide as you are," but should always be qualified with exceptions presented in other scriptures, such as "come out from among them" in 2 Cor. 6:17, or as apparent in this section.

3. The brother or sister is not bound by this ruling, "abide as you are," if they are married to an unbeliever who wants to depart, i.e. leave the believer. For this reason the believer can let the unbelieving partner depart.

4. The word "bound" which is used in this case is not the one Paul uses when referring to the marriage bond, but is always in all other cases used in its root sense of "being enslaved" (Rom. 6:18, 22; 1 Cor. 9:19; Gal. 4:3; Tit. 2:3). The word Paul uses for the marriage bond is deo (1 Cor. 7:39; Rom. 7:2).

5. If remarriage is what Paul is teaching in this passage, he has used very uncertain language in granting permission when he could have been specific, as he normally is, in the language he uses.

1 Cor. 7:13-16, to this author, teaches that the believer is to remain with the unbelieving partner because God accepts such marriages, thus making the children legitimate. Paul seems to be addressing the problem of whether or not God accepts such marriages, and concludes that God does accept them and the Christian should remain as he is. In cases where the unbelieving partner wants to depart, this ruling "abide as you are" never is binding, for the believing partner may let the unbelieving partner depart with no obligation to either maintain the marriage or to prevent his departing.

If the partner departs, the believer can marry again only if the partner dies or if the partner is sexually unfaithful. "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). "Whoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery" (Matt. 19:9). "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6).

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"When Thou Art Converted, Strengthen the Brethren"

by H. Joe Spangler

Luke 22-31-34, "And the Lord said, 'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat; But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted, strengthen the brethren.' And he said unto Him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death.' And He said, 'I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me.'"

A major lesson we learn from the above text is that one can be convicted of truth and yet not be converted to living it. Peter believed Jesus to be the Son of God (Matt. 16:16), yet despite his claim (Luke 22:33) he was not willing to give all - even his life to the Christ (Luke 22:34; John 18:25-27).

Many a man is convicted of the Deity of Jesus and knows much of what the Lord requires of man, but yet he is "not ready." Such have not converted their heart over to the service of the Son. The great commandment to those who would be converted is, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30). The bottom line and proof of conversion is doing the will of the Father. See Matt. 18:3; 7:21. Conversion of the penitent believer to a life dedicated to Christ begins at baptism. Compare Acts 2:38; 3:19. Sadly, the religious masses are generally convicted of His nature but not converted to His way. This reminds us of our great work "for the obedience to the faith among all nations" (Mark 16:15; Rom. 1:5, 16).

Another important point in our text is that those who have been converted have a crucial obligation to the brethren: edification. Peter failed and his faith was tried, but he thus was made more able to strengthen others. He learned that over-confidence is dangerous and can lull one into thinking that Satan is only a sleeping lion. His experience enabled his strengthening advice of I Peter 5:8, 9. When we share our experiences in the battle against sin, we lend strength to others to overcome. In cowardice Peter denied Christ; after conversion he exhorted to steadfast con-

fession (I Peter 3:13-16). Is there not a brother presently suffering something you have been able to overcome? Provide a hand of comfort and words of strength. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

As one studies the various aspects of the Christian religion he sees that they lend strength to the several members of the body (I Cor. 12:25, 26; Eph. 2:21; 4:16-32; I Pet. 1:22). Our assemblies together are to offer occasion to provoke one another unto love and good works (Heb. 10:24-26). When one forsakes these assemblies, He not only harms himself and disrespects this passage, but he does nothing to strengthen the brethren and disrespects the Christ (Acts 9:1,4). Brother or sister, have you considered the discouraging effect you have on other Christians when you demonstrate a lack of enjoyment for their fellowship? "Strengthen the brethren." Consider how the elements of our worship together lend themselves to edification: prayer (Jas. 5:16; Acts 8:24; 12:5); singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16); et al.

We are either building up or tearing down the body of Christ. There is really no in-between! Each day affords new opportunities to build or destroy. When a fellow saint sins we may strengthen him by letting him know of our concern and by calling him to repentance (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1; Jas. 5:19, 20). When he repents we build him up by forgiving him. "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves; for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging" (I Pet. 4:8, 9). See also Ephesians 4:31-5:1. There are brethren suffering afflictions via sickness and distress who need the strength of those who love them (Rom. 12:13, 15; Jas. 5:13-15). Equally important is the need we all have of daily edification in the word which "is able to build you up" (Acts 20:32; Eph. 4:29).

Brethren, let's look for ways to build up the body. Let us stand for the truth, oppose the wrong, and hold up the hands of all who try to live the converted life. If we are converted to the Lord, our love demands that we strengthen the brethren. Recall the Master's words to the "converted" Peter: "Lovest thou me?...Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

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Give Me The Truth!

If you are my friends, if you are concerned about my soul, give me the truth. Do not flatter me. Do not praise my virtues while remaining silent about my vices. Do not fear that the truth will offend me. Do not treasure our friendship, our friendly relations, above my salvation. Do not think that being blind to my sins will prove yourself charitable. However I may react to it, whatever may be my attitude toward you after you have done it, **GIVE ME THE TRUTH!**

For the truth, and only the truth, can make men free from the shackles of sin, strengthen me in the pathway of righteousness and lead me to the joys of heaven. If I am wavering, weak, lukewarm, have been drawn into the pleasures of the world; if I have left my first love; if I have been led astray by error or if I have done none of these, but simply need to grow in knowledge and be edified, **GIVE ME THE TRUTH!**

VIA Leedy, OK Bulletin

A sign at the entrance of a department store: "LADIES READY TO WEAR CLOTHES," and underneath, in bold, masculine handwriting, were the following words: "It's about time."

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THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

1. The Bible is its only guide (Romans 1:16; I Thess. 2:13).
2. Wears a Biblical Name (Romans 16:16).
3. Established at the right place (Isaiah 2:2,3; Acts 2).
4. Established at the right time (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2).
5. Established on the right person (Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:36).
6. Saved are in it (Ephesians 5:23; Acts 2:47).
7. Its members are enrolled in heaven (Hebrews 12:23).
8. Membership in it is obtained by obedience to God's commands including baptism (Acts 2:41-47; I Corinthians 12:13).

GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

1. Hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17; Acts 16:32).
2. Believing what is taught (Mark 16:16; Hebrews 11:6).
3. Repentance (Acts 2:38; Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30).
4. Confession (Romans 10:9, 10; Acts 8:37).
5. Baptism (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; I Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3, 4).
6. After the above five steps, faithful Christian Living (I Peter 2:11, 12; Revelation 2:10).

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