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Faith and works according to James

James 2

Can you imagine that the Reformation is already about 500 years behind us, and likewise the beginning of the Baptist movement, which wanted to go back more radically to the Biblical roots of our faith? But the idea of the ruling church was also held for a long time in the centuries that followed, so that actually today we still have to get used to the reality of a suffering and persecuted church, which is much more true from a biblical and historical viewpoint.

Unfortunately, Luther and others were also guilty of wrong practices motivated by their position, by, among other things, having the Anabaptists – their fellow Christians – persecuted by secular authorities because of their baptismal practice. Luther even criticized the letter of James, which he called "a straw letter" (i.e. straw-like and inflammable), because it would place too much emphasis on man's good works.

In retrospect we can see that this was a great misunderstanding. While the letter to the Romans is about justification by faith alone, that is, without works of the law, before God, the righteous Judge, the letter of James is about our practical justification before people around us, precisely through works of mercy that we do as believers. However, these are not works of the law, to boast of, but rather works of faith (Jas. 2:14-26). It is a different perspective, a different viewpoint. But James certainly does not want to detract from the doctrine of justification before God by faith alone, that is, without human efforts, as is taught in the letter to the Romans.

James shows us that faith without works is dead and purposeless. Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so too is faith without the corresponding works. It clearly revolves around true faith, which is demonstrated by true love – the love of God, which has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5). James mentions two special examples of this: namely, the faith of Abraham and that of Rahab (Jas. 2:21, 25).

Why are these examples so particularly encouraging? It is about demonstrating true love toward God (1), but also toward people around us (2). For our faith must be active through love. That is the subject of James, and that is why he quotes especially from Genesis 22 (cf. Jas. 2:21). Abraham's faith, by which he had already been justified in Genesis 15, was demonstrated in practice by his willingness to sacrifice the dearest thing he had (his only son) to God. This was his ultimate act of faith. In Romans 4, Paul specifically quotes from Genesis 15, which is about Abraham's unconditional faith in God's promises. This is the faith, without works of the law, by which we are justified before God. His faith was made perfect out of his subsequent works, and it was thus confirmed before God and men (Jas. 2:22).

Rahab showed true love for God's people, by hiding the spies and allowing them to leave Jericho by another route (Josh. 2 and 6). But this act of love was based on her unconditional faith in God's promises to His people; she identified herself with them. She also made use of the remedy that was offered to her: the scarlet cord, which prophetically speaks of redemption through the blood of Christ (cf. Isa. 1:18). So she had true faith in God's Word, but also showed true love and self-sacrifice towards the people of God. In this way she was justified before God as well as before men. Let us learn from these two examples for our life of faith.

