

THE GOSPEL LESSON 22

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 4

Their Proof Texts Examined

2 Timothy 2:15 – *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*

WHERE WE ARE

The last lesson showed that Reformed Theology keeps the words of the gospel and changes what they carry. Faith becomes a quality that yields obedience, grace becomes a power that must bring about change, and the Spirit becomes the guarantee that the change appears. Once those definitions are in place, the fifth petal does not need to add a requirement for works. The requirement is already inside the words.

A doctrine of that weight is not held without texts, and Reformed Theology brings them forward with confidence. This lesson takes up four of the most important: James 2:14–26, Matthew 7:15–23, the soils of Matthew 13, and Hebrews 12:14. Each text is read where it stands: who is speaking, to whom, about what, and in what setting.

When the four are read that way, a pattern appears, and it has two parts. The first is that texts addressed to Israel about the Kingdom are carried into the church age and read as tests of individual salvation. The second is that texts addressed to the church are read with definitions imported into their key words. Matthew 7 and Matthew 13 belong to the first part. James 2 and Hebrews 12:14 belong to the second.

I. JAMES 2:14-26

In their own words. The Westminster Confession states the doctrine in the same sentence that confesses justification by faith alone:

Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love. (WCF 11.2)

Calvin gave the doctrine its best-known form in his reply to the Council of Trent:

It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone. (Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote, Sixth Session, Canon 11)

John Piper draws the same conclusion directly from James 2:14 and 2:17: the only faith that saves is a faith that leads the believer to fight sin and obey (Ask Pastor John, Episode 1663). On this reading, "faith without works is dead" (2:26) describes a faith that was never alive, and "Can that faith save him?" (2:14) expects the answer that it cannot save him from hell.

What the text affirms. James is written to believers. The address is "my brethren" (2:14), the same address used throughout the letter (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5). The subject is stated in the first verse of the

THE GOSPEL LESSON 22

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 4

Their Proof Texts Examined

paragraph and illustrated in the next two: "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works?" A brother or sister is without clothing and daily food, and the believer says, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and gives nothing. "What use is that?" (2:15–16). The question is usefulness, ὄφελος *ophelos*, and it opens and closes the illustration. The passage concerns a present, practical need in the assembly, not how a person is justified before God.

Five words carry the passage, and James defines each of them in its own context.

Faith, πίστις *pistis*, is the doctrine of God that is believed. The objector's faith in 2:19 is a doctrine: "You believe that God is one."

Works, ἔργον *ergon*, are good deeds done toward others. The example in 2:15–16 is clothing and food for a brother, and the examples in 2:21–25 are Abraham's offering of Isaac and Rahab's receiving of the messengers. None of them is the avoidance of sin.

Save, σώζω *sōzō*, is present deliverance from the consequences of sin. The letter has already said what sin brings: "when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (1:15). It has also said what the word does for believers: "in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls" (1:21). The ones whose souls need saving in 1:21 are "my beloved brethren" (1:19). "Can that faith save him?" (2:14) asks whether doctrine believed and never acted upon will deliver a believer from the consequences James has already named. It will not.

Dead, νεκρός *nekros*, is unprofitable. A body without the spirit is not missing; it is present and useless (2:26). Faith "by itself" (2:17) is faith that is present and has no effect on the brother who is cold and hungry.

Justified, δικαιώω *dikaioō*, in 2:21–25 is being declared right before men. "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (2:24). The verb "see" sets the scene: this is a justification that can be observed. Romans makes the distinction in one sentence: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God" (Romans 4:2).

The objector of 2:18–19 is an unbelieving Jew. He confesses the Shema, "God is one," and the answer is that the demons confess it too, and shudder. The objection is not a believer's question about assurance.

What is imported. The Reformed reading supplies a sentence the passage does not contain: that true faith brings about works, so that the absence of works proves the absence of faith. James never says faith brings about works. The letter commands believers to add works to their faith and asks what use their faith is to anyone if they do not. "The faith that justifies is not alone" is Calvin's sentence and Westminster's sentence. It is not a sentence in James. Once *save* is made to mean deliverance from hell, *dead* to mean nonexistent, and *justified* to mean justified before God, James is set against

THE GOSPEL LESSON 22

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 4

Their Proof Texts Examined

Romans 4:5, "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." With James's own definitions in place, the two letters do not touch.

II. MATTHEW 7:15-23

In their own words. The Westminster Confession calls good works "the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith" (WCF 16.2), and Matthew 7 is the text where Reformed Theology most often finds that language. Tom Ascol, writing in Ligonier's *Tabletalk*, reads 7:21–23 as a description of professing Christians who were self-deceived, and draws from it the call to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. His summary is direct: "Heaven is reserved for those who do the will of God" (*Tabletalk*, March 22, 2008). On this reading, fruit is the test of genuine profession, and the absence of fruit marks those Christ never knew.

What the text affirms. The Sermon on the Mount was preached to Israel under the Law, and its subject is entering the Kingdom of Heaven, the Millennial Kingdom the prophets promised. It opens with the Kingdom (5:3, 10), it measures righteousness against the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), and it closes with entrance into the Kingdom (7:21). The verb σῶζω *sōzō* does not appear anywhere in Matthew 5–7. The Sermon does not address how a person receives eternal life.

The paragraph names its own subject in its first sentence: "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (7:15). The trees and their fruit that follow are prophets and their message. "You will know them by their fruits" (7:16): the hearers are to test the prophets, not themselves.

Verses 21–23 stay with the same men. Their plea is a prophet's plea: "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" (7:22). The verb is προφητεύω *prophēteuō*, and it ties these men to the false prophets of verse 15. Christ's verdict names what they are: "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (7:23). Lawlessness, ἀνομία *anomia*, is the mark of a false prophet under the Law. The men in view were never believers who failed. They are false prophets who were never known.

What is imported. The Reformed reading moves the test from the prophets to the hearers and from Israel's Kingdom to the believer's eternal standing. A warning to beware of false teachers becomes an instruction to examine one's own fruit for evidence of salvation. The text does not ask the hearer to look at himself at all. It tells him to look at the prophet.

III. MATTHEW 13:18-23

In their own words. The Canons of Dort read the soils as a map of those who hear the gospel, and they name the second and third soils directly:

THE GOSPEL LESSON 22

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 4

Their Proof Texts Examined

others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their heart; therefore, their joy, arising only from a temporary faith, soon vanishes, and they fall away; while others choke the seed of the word by perplexing cares and the pleasures of this world, and produce no fruit. This our Savior teaches in the parable of the sower. (Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads, Article 9)

Dort's Fifth Head goes further, rejecting anyone who says temporary faith differs from saving faith only in how long it lasts. Christ, the Canons say, marks a threefold difference: the temporary believer receives the seed in stony ground, is without root, and is without fruit (Fifth Head, Rejection of Errors 7). Calvin likewise made room for a "temporary faith" in those who are not elect (Institutes 3.2.11), as we saw in the last lesson. On this reading, the soils sort professing Christians into the false and the true, and fruit is the proof of the true.

What the text affirms. The parable explains its own seed: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart" (13:19). The seed is the word of the Kingdom, τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας *ton logon tēs basileias*, the message Israel had been hearing since John the Baptist and Jesus first announced that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (3:2; 4:17). The parables of Matthew 13 explain "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (13:11), what would become of that offer once Israel's leaders had rejected the King (Matthew 12).

The differences among the soils are differences in understanding and endurance. The rocky ground "hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary" (13:20–21). The word is πρόσκαιρος *proskairos*, and it describes the hearer, not his faith. The good ground "hears the word and understands it" (13:23), and the verb is συνίημι *sunīēmi*. In Matthew 13 neither σώζω *sōzō* nor πίστις *pistis* appears. The parable never asks who is saved.

What is imported. Dort supplies the word "faith" where Matthew has none, places it beside "temporary," and so builds a category, temporary faith, that the parable does not name. The word of the Kingdom spoken to Israel becomes the gospel of eternal life preached to the church, and four kinds of hearers become two kinds of professing Christians. That is the first part of the pattern. The soils, like the Sermon, are Kingdom texts addressed to Israel, and both are carried into the church age as tests of salvation.

IV. HEBREWS 12:14

The Westminster Confession ends its chapter on sanctification with this verse:

They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more

THE GOSPEL LESSON 22

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 4

Their Proof Texts Examined

and more quickened and strengthened, in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. (WCF 13.1)

John Piper states the reading without qualification. The holiness of Hebrews 12:14, he says, is not the righteousness imputed to us in Christ, but "the kind of righteousness that you pursue, you strive for" (Ask Pastor John, Episode 1663). He adds that this pursued holiness does not ground our acceptance; it confirms it, and the confirmation is necessary. On this reading, the verse makes a holy life the condition of seeing the Lord.

Where the sentence belongs. The paragraph opens in 12:12–13. The weak hands and feeble knees are to be strengthened, and the paths made straight, "so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." That is the language of an assembly. The readers are under the Father's discipline (12:5–11), some of them are worn down, and the charge is given to all of them together: "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14).

What the sanctification is. One imperative governs two objects: Εἰρήνην διώκετε μετὰ πάντων καὶ τὸν ἁγιασμόν *Eirēnēn diōkete meta pantōn kai ton hagianmon*. Peace is anarthrous. Sanctification is articular, τὸν ἁγιασμόν *ton hagianmon*, "the sanctification." The article specifies. It sets out a particular sanctification and not holiness in general.

The letter's own usage settles which one. The noun ἁγιασμός *hagiasmos* occurs only here in Hebrews, but the verb ἁγιάζω *hagiazō* runs through the letter, and every time it says what sanctifies. "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10). "Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate" (13:12). Over against both stands the old order: the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer "sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh" (9:13), and nothing more. The relative clause of 12:14 identifies that consecration. It does not grade a life. Without this sanctification no one will see the Lord. With the shadows, no one did.

Two further details hold the reading in place. Hebrews 10:14 reads, "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." The last phrase is an articular present participle, τοὺς ἁγιαζομένους *tous hagianzomenous*, the same construction as "those who are being saved" in 1 Corinthians 1:18. It names a class of people, the sanctified ones, and the verb before it says that class has been perfected for all time. Hebrews 2:11 uses the same construction for both sides of the relationship: "both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father."

The other detail is 12:10, four verses earlier: the Father disciplines us "for our good, so that we may share His holiness." The word there is ἁγιότης *hagiotēs*, a different word. It describes the Father's training of His children, and the passage says who receives it: "God deals with you as with sons," and

THE GOSPEL LESSON 22

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 4

Their Proof Texts Examined

those without discipline "are illegitimate children and not sons" (12:7–8). Sonship is assumed in that training, not tested by it.

What "pursue" means. διώκω *diōkō* stands in the present imperative plural. The word is a chase: run after, press toward, seek. It does not mean produce, complete, or earn. The same verb takes "peace" as its object in Romans 14:19 and 1 Peter 3:11, where 1 Peter quotes the psalm: "Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14). A man pursues peace by going after it with people. He does not become its source. The verb does the same kind of work with its second object. Three things are true of the chase in this sentence.

It is corporate. The imperative is plural, and the next word of the paragraph is the participle "see to it" (12:15). The pursuit belongs to the assembly, not to an individual building a private standing.

It is directional, not generative. Its object is a consecration the letter has already said was secured by one offering. To pursue it is to make that consecration the thing the assembly goes after, and not the old approach to God. Many things in their world were called holy. Only one sanctification is the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

It is ongoing because the pull away was ongoing. A present imperative fits readers who were being worn down and tempted to drift back to what never gave access. It is not a demand to acquire a sanctification they lack. It is a charge to keep the consecration of Christ as their aim.

The letter has already told them how. They draw near "by the blood of Jesus... with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (10:19–22). They hold fast the confession (4:14; 10:23) and do not forsake assembling together (10:25). They "go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach" (13:13), to the One who sanctified the people through His own blood. The Sanctifier is Christ (2:11). The sanctification is His offering. Pursuing it is refusing another altar.

Seeing the Lord. The verb is ὁράω *horaō* in the future. Seeing the Lord stays inside the same frame: it is the sight that belongs to those who have this consecration, the approach the letter has been opening since it first told the readers to draw near, and that arrives at Mount Zion, "to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood" (12:22–24). It is not a wage for a finished life, and it is not a standing the assembly can lose.

The watch of 12:15–17. Verse 15 begins the watch: "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal" (12:15–16). The one who comes short of the grace of God, ὑστερέω *hustereō*, is a believer who falls back to a false system and fails to draw on grace. The letter states the alternative near its close: "Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefited" (13:9). The readers

THE GOSPEL LESSON 22

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 4

Their Proof Texts Examined

were not in danger of losing the consecration. They were in danger of turning from it to an altar that could not perfect the worshiper, and so of no longer drawing on the grace in which they stood.

Esau is set before the assembly as the scriptural portrait of godlessness, βέβηλος *bebēlos*, a community's warning about its own life together. He is not a mechanism. The text never says the inheritance in the Son is something a believer sells.

What is imported. The Reformed reading turns the articular noun into holiness in general, and holiness in general into the believer's progressive moral life. That life then becomes the condition of seeing the Lord: necessary, Piper says, as the confirmation of justification. That is the second part of the pattern. James and Hebrews are read with definitions imported into their key words.

The parallel to the readers of Hebrews is direct. The fifth petal, as Lesson 20 showed, makes a holy life the necessary confirmation that a person was justified. A believer who takes that doctrine up does not lose the consecration Christ accomplished. He turns his eyes from it to his own record, and in the language of 12:15 he comes short of the grace of God. The grace is still there; he has stopped drawing on it. The letter that warned its first readers against going back to a system of performance warns against this one in the same words.

V. THE TEXT IN SCRIPTURE

Read in their settings, none of the four texts asks how a person receives eternal life. James asks what use a believer's faith is to a hungry brother. Matthew 7 warns Israel against false prophets on the way to the Kingdom. Matthew 13 explains what would become of the word of the Kingdom once Israel's leaders rejected the King. Hebrews 12:14 charges a weary assembly to keep pursuing the one consecration that brings anyone into the presence of God, and not to turn back to an altar that could not.

Scripture states plainly how life is received, and it states it without these texts. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9).

The sanctification Hebrews 12:14 requires is not left for the believer to finish. The letter has already said where it comes from and how long it holds. "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14).