



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Faith vs. Works? On the Teaching of James and Paul

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Let's begin with a quotation recognition exercise. Identify the Bible author who wrote each of the following:

- They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.
- For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.
- For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

If you answered Paul, James, and Paul, you're correct; in order, the verses are Titus 1.16; James 2.26; and Romans 2.13. But in light of popular treatments and debates among scholars, it is understandable if some are surprised by those answers, especially numbers one and three. P. H. Davids has summarized the debate:

Since the Reformation James and Paul have often been viewed as having contradictory theologies, one focusing on works and the other on grace. ...

Ever since Luther the watchword of Pauline studies has been "justification by faith alone, not by works." At the same time one can hardly ignore the fact that James 2:24 states, "You see that a person is declared right [or justified] by [their] deeds [works] and not by faith alone." This apparent conflict

with Paul's view of justification is further complicated by the fact that both Paul (Rom 4:3, 9, 22; Gal 3:6) and James (Jas 2:23) refer to Abraham and cite Genesis 15:6 in support of seemingly opposite views (Davids 1993, 457).

In particular, many have considered these statements by the two to be incompatible:

- You see that a person is justified by works [ἔργον, *ergon*] and not by faith [πίστις, *pistis*] alone (Jas 2.24).
- For we hold that one is justified by faith [*pistis*] apart from works [*ergon*] of the law (Rom 3.28).

New Testament believers have traditionally given more attention to Paul's writings, partly because there are more of them and they were accepted into the canon more readily than James (see McCartney 2009, 14–24), but also because of the good news inherent in Paul's affirmations about justification and salvation. Notable examples of these affirmations include: All who will be acquitted from their fall from God's glory "are justified by his grace as a gift ... justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom 3.23–24, 28); "for by grace you have been saved through faith, ... not a result of works" (Eph 2.8–9); "but if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (Rom 11.6). James, on other hand, connects justification with works, citing the example of Abraham who was "justified by works" as the basis for his conclusion that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas 2.21, 24).

So, are we justified by grace through faith or by works? Various solutions have been proposed to explain the apparent discrepancy. [1] Some have discounted, or minimized, James. [2] Some have argued that James meant to correct Paul. [3] Others contended he was responding to a misunderstanding of Paul. [4] Conversely, another group said that Paul was correcting James or a distortion of James (see Davids 1993, 457–458).

Seeking Resolution

Before examining the question more closely, we will benefit from knowing that the debate that became the focus in the West was virtually non-existent in the East (Johnson 1995, 130–135). For example, in commentaries on Romans, both Origen (ca. 185–ca. 253) and Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444) used James 2 to *explain* Paul's teaching in Romans 3–4. And a thousand years before Luther,

Severus [the Patriarch of Antioch, ca. 465–538] concludes that Paul agrees with James, citing Gal 5:6, 'Faith working through love.' And in the strongest contrast to Luther, Severus' governing principle is 'The holy writings and the fathers have always handed on to us a harmonious teaching (Johnson 1995, 135).

When we move historically beyond Luther and the layers of tradition that have accumulated since the Reformation to examine the texts in their first-century setting, we discover that James and Paul were dealing with different concerns and using the words *justify* and *works* in different ways.

The English verb *justify* has multiple meanings, two of which are: [1] “to show (an act, claim, statement, etc.) to be just or right,” synonyms for which are “validate, vindicate”; [2] “theology: to declare innocent or guiltless; absolve, acquit.” (*Dictionary.com*). The Greek verb, δικαίωω (*dikaioō*), had the same meanings, as demonstrated in the definition given by Frederick Danker:

δικαίωω [δικαίος]—1. ‘verify to be in the right’, *justify* Mt 11:19; 12:37; Lk 7:29; 10:29; 18:14; Ro 2:13; 3:4, 20; 4:2; 1 Cor 4:4; Gal 5:4; 1 Ti 3:16; Js 2:21, 24f.—2. ‘put into a condition or state of uprightness’, *justify, set right* Ac 13:38f (in connection with forgiveness of sins mediated through Jesus); Ro 3:24, 26, 28, 30; 4:5; 5:1, 9; 8:30; 1 Cor 6:11; Gal 2:16f; 3:8; Tit 3:7 9 (Danker 2009, 97).

Notice that Danker includes James 2.24 among the passages that illustrate the first meaning and Romans 3.28 among those that illustrate the second. There is debate about whether Paul intended to use *dikaioō* in the sense of forensic righteousness or in a covenantal sense to mean “to put right with, to cause to be in a right relationship with” (Louw-Nida 1989, § 34.46); but whichever nuance he intended, he clearly means something different than what James means. In Romans 3–4, Paul uses *dikaioō* to refer to the action that makes believers right with God, an action that also provides acquittal from sin and its consequences. James, on the other hand, uses the word in James 2 in the sense of the deeds people do that verify their claim to have faith. And as the citations from Danker indicate, Paul uses the word the same way in Romans 2.13 and elsewhere.

A difference in emphasis is also seen in the way the two writers use the word *works* in Romans 3 and James 2. In his argument in Romans, Paul is talking about reliance on a certain category of works—“the works of the law” (of Moses; cf. Rom 10.5)—to be made right with God and/or acquitted from sin. James, on the other hand, is using the word to refer to the works that follow from a profession of belief. As McCartney comments regarding James’s references to the works of Abraham and Rahab:

We also should note that the particular “works” that James gives as examples are not Paul’s works of the law (for [at the time of Abraham and Rahab] the Torah had not yet been given); they are works of faith, works that exemplify the fact Abraham and Rahab trusted God (McCartney 2009, 274).

It is noteworthy that in multiple passages, Paul also uses “works” to emphasize the obedience of genuine faith, the sense in which James uses the term. In addition to Romans 2.13 and Titus 1.16, we note Galatians 5.6 where Paul declares, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working [ἐνεργέω, *energeō*] through love.” In fact, as documented by Johnson, Paul uses “work” in the sense of working out a profession of faith in

50 of its 67 occurrences in his letters (e.g., Rom 13.3, 12; 14.20; 15.18; 1 Cor 3.13–15; 9.1; 15.58; 16.10; 2 Cor 9.8; 11.15; 1 Thess 1.3; 5.13; 2 Thess 2.17) (Johnson 1995, 60).

Conclusion

The early church writers in the East had it right: When Paul spoke of being justified apart from works, he was referring to the process by which we are forgiven while demonstrating “the faith that led to baptism.” James was talking “about the faith of [those who had been] baptized” (Johnson 1995, 134). So, in their theologies of salvation and faithfulness, “no contradiction actually exists” (McCartney 2009, 272).

Works Cited

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