

JAMES AND PAUL ON JUSTIFICATION

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Do James and Paul contradict one another on the subject of justification? Paul writes, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith *without the deeds of the law*" (Rom. 3:28). God justifies the believing sinner on the basis of "the righteousness of God *without the law*" (v. 21). In Galatians, he is equally emphatic: "A man is *not justified by the works* of the law ... *by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified*" (Gal. 2:16). Moreover, Paul proves the doctrine of justification by appealing to the example of Abraham: "if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory, but not before God" (Rom. 4:2). About the patriarch, Paul writes, "but to him that *worketh not*, but believeth ..." (Rom. 4:5), and then points out that Abraham was justified by faith *before* he was circumcised (v. 10)!

James, however, writes something which superficially seems contradictory to Paul. James writes that Abraham "was justified *by works*" (James 2:21) and then adds a conclusion which would appear to be devastating to the Reformed position: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (v. 24). Even today, you will meet Roman Catholics who will say, "The phrase 'justified by faith alone' is not found in the Bible. The only place where Scripture mentions it, it condemns it, as in James 2:24: 'not by faith alone.' Case closed. The Reformation was wrong."

Before we address the question, we must stress the truth that James and Paul do not contradict one another. How could they? They both wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (II Pet. 1:21). Moreover, both were present at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and there was no hint of disagreement between Paul, Peter or James. Remember the subject of that Council was justification (Acts 15:10-19)! Furthermore, both Paul and James use the same Greek word for "justify." Both Paul and James appeal to the same Old Testament example of Abraham. Both Paul and James quote Genesis 15:6, "And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness."

We must understand that Paul and James are addressing two very different situations. Paul is addressing the question of a sinner's justification *before God*.

James and Paul on Justification

Carefully, systematically and in great detail, Paul explains the utter depravity of man: “there is none righteous” (Rom. 3:10), and therefore God Himself has provided the only righteousness which is acceptable before Him (vv. 21ff.). Therefore, Paul deals with great theological concepts such as righteousness and imputation. He sets forth the glorious work of Jesus Christ as the only ground on which the believer’s justification rests. Also, although he does not use the phrase, “by faith alone,” he emphatically and repeatedly excludes works from justification.

Therefore, to understand justification we must start with Paul, not with James. This does not mean that James is less authoritative, less important or less inspired than Paul. However, if one wants to study a subject, one must first study that place where the subject is treated at length. James’ main point is not justification but the life of faith in the believer.

When we examine what James is teaching in context, we will conclude that James and Paul are in complete harmony. Both teach justification by faith alone, and both teach that there is an important place for works—but not in justification before God.

In chapter two of his epistle, James is addressing the man who says that he has faith, but who has no works to demonstrate his faith: “though a man *say* he hath faith, and have not works” (v. 14); “if you *say*” (v. 16); “a man may *say*” (v. 18); “*shew* me thy faith ... I will *shew* thee my faith” (v. 18). Faith itself is invisible, but the fruits of faith are not invisible. True faith—as opposed to “dead” faith (v. 17)—always displays itself to others by means of works. The examples in the chapter are striking: one with true faith does not ignore the needs of a destitute brother or sister in the church (vv. 15-16); true faith goes beyond the mere intellectual knowledge of devils, who know many facts about God but hate and fear Him (v. 19); one with true faith is willing to deny himself, as did Abraham and Rahab (vv. 21, 25). All of this simply means that you know a believer, not by the loudness of his profession, but by the fruit of his faith. Our faith in Jesus Christ will lead us to love God and the neighbour. It will bring us to true sorrow over sin and hearty thankfulness to our Saviour manifested in obedience. One without true faith—a hypocrite or a “vain man” (v. 20)—will lead an ungodly life.

James appeals to the example of Abraham. In Scripture, we read of Abraham being justified by faith some seven chapters and thirteen years *before* the test of his faith on Mt. Moriah (Gen. 15:6; 22:16). Both Paul and James teach this (Rom. 4:3; James 2:23). What was God doing on Mt. Moriah then? He was not justifying Abraham again. He was proving to Abraham, to us and to all the world that Abraham had true faith, that Abraham's faith was not a pious-sounding sham. So strong was Abraham's faith—a faith which God worked in him and perfected through this trial and by which He had already justified him—that he was willing, when commanded, to sacrifice his son (Rom. 4:19-22; Heb. 11:17-19; James 2:21-23). Thus, writes James concerning the trial, "Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness" (James 2:22-23). Genesis 22 proves the genuineness of the testimony of Genesis 15! The same is true with respect to Rahab, the harlot of Jericho. She believed in the true God (Josh. 2:8-13), but how did she demonstrate to the spies of Joshua the genuineness of her faith? She did so by siding with Israel, helping Israel's spies, saving them from death and "betraying" her own city in a time of war at great risk to herself (James 2:25).

So, in what sense were Abraham and Rahab justified by their works, and in what sense are we? In the sense that our works are all or at least part of our righteousness before God? In the sense that God accepts our imperfect obedience as a suitable alternative to the perfect righteousness of Christ? Absolutely not (James 2:10)! We are justified by works in that our good works (which flow from faith) vindicate or prove the genuineness of our faith *before men*. Those who have no good works and who live in an ungodly manner show by that very fact that their faith is counterfeit. As James puts it: their faith is "dead" (James 2:17, 20, 26).

One final word about "good works." The Bible calls "good works" those works which are done in obedience to God's commandments, out of a true faith and to the glory of God. The good works of the Reformed Christian are the common, everyday, unglamorous good works of loving God and the neighbour, especially, but not exclusively, the neighbour in the church and family (Gal. 6:10). We have been created "unto good works" (Eph. 2:10). Believers

James and Paul on Justification

(especially women) show their beauty by good works (I Tim. 2:10). Believers are commanded to be “rich in good works” (I Tim. 6:18). The Bible equips us for “all good works” (II Tim. 3:17). Christ’s death makes us “zealous of good works” (Tit. 2:14). We are called carefully to “maintain good works” (Tit. 3:8). We are to urge one another to do good works (Heb. 10:24). We silence the accusations of evil men by good works (I Pet. 2:12).

Let no one say that the Reformed faith discourages good works!

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