

The Relationship Between Faith and Works

A Comparison of James 2:24 and Ephesians 2:8-10

Part IV

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To My Father
In Loving Memory

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Who Dedicated His Life To Loving His Family
“Family Comes First”

I Miss You!

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Above all, you must understand that no prophesy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

-2 Peter 1:20-21-

Does James contradict Paul or does he complement him? James stresses that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone, while Paul stresses justification by faith alone and not by works. Is the relationship between faith and works different for James as it is for Paul? Since the doctrine of justification is “the main hinge on which religion turns” it is essential that this matter be investigated. A variety of solutions have been proposed by commentators to answer this question.

Possible Solutions

(1) James 2 demonstrated that works are required for salvation. This view argued that justification depends on both faith and works. When Paul argued that justification was apart from works, he was referring to works of law. Paul was arguing against Judaizers who held that one had to perform the works of Old Testament law to be acceptable to God. Paul was saying that these works of law could not justify. But James was addressing those works¹ that all Christians are required to perform.²

(2) Paul was writing about eternal salvation, while James was writing about the liberation of the effects of sin of those who were already saved. James was addressing

¹ works of love (i.e. feed hungry and give to the poor).

² Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (St. Louis: Herder, 1964), 354; E. H. Plumptre, *The General Epistle of St. James*, Cambridge Bible for School and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1876), 75.

the temporal judgment for sin and the believer's acquittal before others, but not in the sense of salvation as friends of God or as carnal Christians. He was addressing the relationship or lack thereof between a believer and God that would demonstrate that they are a true disciple or a carnal Christian.³

(3) James was teaching that justification depends on both faith and works and that he was directly contradicting Paul. Paul clearly taught that justification was by faith alone. This proposal places James and Paul's teaching in contrast. This view does not uphold the inerrancy of Scripture.⁴

(4) James and Paul had different purposes for their writings. They each used their terms⁵ with different meanings. Paul was interested in expressing the basis on which a person has a right standing before God;⁶ while James was interested in demonstrating that a believer's true conversion is warranted by works and he wanted to refute the prevalent antinomianism he faced. Paul was writing in regard to a forensic declaration of righteousness, while James was writing of an outward demonstration of righteousness. James was teaching that true faith is proved genuine by works and a confession void of works is not the result of regeneration.⁷

While these proposed solutions are brief, a discussion demonstrating the errors of the first three proposals will not be discussed due to the length required.⁸ The following discussion will demonstrate that the fourth proposal is most theologically and biblically accurate.

A Different Use of Terms

The fourth proposal states that James and Paul used terms differently. James wrote in verse 24, "You see that by works a man is justified and not out of faith alone."⁹ This seems to directly contradict Paul who wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this not by you, God's gift; not by works, in order that no one [can] boast. For you are His handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the purpose of good works

³ Zane Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character through Testing* (Irving, TX.: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 41-42, 60-72.

⁴ James Hardy Ropes, 34-36; E. C. Blackman, 93; J. T. Sanders, 115-8.

⁵ The terms faith and works.

⁶ i.e. justification.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 309-317; James Adamson, 34-36; R. C. Sproul, 160-71; Colin Brown, "Righteousness, Justification," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 3:365-73; John MacArthur Jr., *James*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 119-42.

⁸ For a further discussion on each view, see the works cited.

⁹ Translation mine.

which God prepared beforehand, in order that in them you walk.”¹⁰ If James and Paul define the terms faith and works similarly, then the contradiction is clear.

Words in every language have a variety of meanings. The dictionary demonstrates the assortment of semantic uses. The same word can have an array of different meanings, while another word may have a narrower range. These semantic ranges do not cause difficulty because a reader is aided by its context. The context is usually enough to clarify the words' correct meaning. This principle is true for the Biblical languages.¹¹ The terms in James and Paul fit the normal range of semantic use. And knowing that the Bible is inerrant, these verses cannot contradict; they must have different meanings attached to them. The historical context above has already demonstrated that the meanings of these words are different.

Faith and Works in James

James demonstrated and contrasted a “dead” faith, which is a confession void of works, with a “living” faith, which is demonstrated through obedience to God. James used the term “faith” in two ways. The first was that of his opponent and the second was his own.¹² He demonstrated that the faith of his opponent was counterfeit. “This faith” as James referred to it, was an “intellectual acceptance of a theological assertion” less than that of demons.¹³ The object of his opponent’s faith was Judaism as described in the *Shema*. This particular faith is “alone” and therefore void of works. James was writing to condemn “bogus” faith, while he was describing true justifying faith. True faith entails the union of faith with works. The confession or mental understanding of orthodoxy was only part of the faith that justifies. James’ faith was two-pronged, the right belief and its union with works.¹⁴ James pressed beyond the mental grasp of his opponent to where behavior and the will are affected.¹⁵ James always used the term “works” positively to mean obedience to God, which included “acts of charity.”¹⁶ The works to which James refers are post-conversion works. James inseparably links faith to works. Faith is demonstrated through the production of good works; and good works stem from faith. James did not teach salvation by works or that works maintained salvation. Salvation is a gift.¹⁷

James’ point to his antinomian audience was that true faith produces works of love and is more than simply a confession or mental grasp. This is why James wrote that one “is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (2:24). True faith is inseparable from

¹⁰ Translation mine.

¹¹ William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction To Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 185.

¹² Robert H. Stein, 5.

¹³ Douglas J. Moo, 107.

¹⁴ Robert V. Rakestraw, 37.

¹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, 107.

¹⁶ Robert H. Stein, 7; Douglas J. Moo, 101-2.

¹⁷ Jas 1:18.

the works it produces.¹⁸ James illustrated that works “perfect” faith and that works “justify” the believer because the works demonstrate true faith.

Faith and Works in Paul

Paul used the term “faith” as the mode by which salvation comes. Jesus Christ is the object of true faith.¹⁹ Salvation is the initiative of God by which faith is given to man as a gift. Faith is a whole-hearted trust in God for the grace required for salvation, which is given independently from any efforts or works of man.²⁰ Faith, like works, is never the cause of salvation. This is why Paul wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works” (Ephesians 2:8). Paul used the term works in two ways similar to the way James spoke of faith in two ways. The first way Paul used the term “works” was negative and the second was positive. Negatively, he used it to stress that works do not merit salvation.²¹ There are no pre-conversion works that grant eternal life.²² Paul repeatedly argued that justification was not earned by “works of law,” or by any work of love. Grace is the cause of salvation.²³ He spoke of works positively when he stressed the necessity of works. Faith results in a new life in Jesus that is characterized by good works. Faith is always obedient. This is why Paul told us that we are created in Christ Jesus for the purpose of doing good works.²⁴

Synthesis of James 2:24 and Ephesians 2:8-10

The difficulty with reconciling these passages occurs when it is assumed that the vocabulary is identical. The terms “faith” and “works,” when applied in similar fashion to each passage, produce an obvious contradiction. James uses the term “faith” with both a positive and a negative aspect. In the same way, Paul uses works both positively and negatively.²⁵ Faith for Paul is used only in the positive;²⁶ similarly, works is used only positively in James.²⁷ When these uses are not distinguished and the natural emphasis of Paul is read into James and vice versa, confusion results. Also, the perspectives by which James and Paul wrote are essential to properly reconcile the apparent

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, 792.

¹⁹ Eph 2:4-7.

²⁰ Robert H. Stein, 6.

²¹ Eph 2:9.

²² Homer A. Kent Jr., 36.

²³ Matthew Henry, 557.

²⁴ Eph 2:10.

²⁵ Eph 2:9-10.

²⁶ Eph 2:8.

²⁷ Robert H. Stein, 7.

contradiction. Paul emphasized how a person is saved, while James emphasized the kind of faith that saves.²⁸

The slogan of the Reformation, “by faith alone” explicitly teaches Paul’s negative use of the law. Paul’s teaching of justification by faith alone is written with great clarity and power. One unquestionably grasps the force of Paul’s argument that works do not lead to salvation because works are antithetical to grace.²⁹ It is this negative aspect of works that naturally comes to mind when reading Paul. If the positive aspect of works is not understood, then Paul’s full teaching of the relationship between faith and works is missed and the Gospel is not fully grasped. Neglecting the positive aspect of works will lead to a misunderstood definition of faith. Only comprehending the negative aspect of works will likely lead to the notion that faith is the “dead” faith that James condemns because it is “alone.” Faith could wrongly be defined as the mental agreement of orthodoxy, which results in justification. But this is not what Paul or James taught. To understand Paul correctly, both aspects of works need to be understood.

The slogan of the Reformation, while explicitly teaching the negative aspect of works, also implies the positive—post-conversion works. Paul wrote, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). Paul says this in Ephesians 2:10 when he wrote that we are created in Christ Jesus for the purpose of doing good works. These good works coincide with true faith and do not stand opposed to it. Paul’s teaching of faith in Ephesians 2:8-10 unfolds the theological as well and the practical elements of salvation—the faith that saves produces works.³⁰ With only grasping Paul’s negative aspect of works—that pre-conversion works do not save—and applying this to James 2:24, it becomes apparent that James and Paul are not teaching the same doctrine. James wrote, “You see that a man is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (2:24). This verse, in light of a misunderstood Paul, is teaching justification by pre-conversion works.

Faith for Paul was used only in the positive sense. Paul assumed, as Ephesians 2:10 teaches, that salvation, by faith alone which produces good works, justifies while pre-conversion works do not.

In verse 24, James used the term “faith” explicitly in the negative and implicitly in the positive. James explicitly used the term “faith” as his opponent understood it—an intellectual grasp of biblical truth.³¹ This is why he said, “...that a person is justified by what he does and not faith *alone*” (2:24).³² This verse can be restated, “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by an intellectual grasp of orthodoxy alone.” Intellectual understanding is not enough for salvation. Paul’s understanding of faith is

²⁸ R. E. Glaze, JR., “The Relationship of Faith to Works in James 1:22-25 and 2:14-26,” *Theological Educator: A Journal of Theology and Ministry* no 34 Fall (1986), 35.

²⁹ Rom 11:6.

³⁰ Thornwald Lorenzen, 233.

³¹ Douglas J. Moo, 107.

³² Emphasis mine.

the same as James;’ faith is obedient. Faith, for James and Paul, is an orthodox grasp of truth that demonstrates itself through loving works. When James and Paul are contrasted, it is assumed that they contradict, but really Paul and James’ opponent contradicts. James and Paul are in accordance with each other. They just use the terms differently, while they are teaching the same principle.

James implied the positive use of faith, which is more than “dead” orthodoxy. It is a vibrant “living” faith that is obedient to God. This faith is demonstrated through post-conversion works. This is what James was teaching when he wrote, “You see a person is justified by what he does” (2:24). This verse can be restated, “You see that a person is justified by a faith that demonstrates itself through obedience to God and not by faith alone.”

Works for James was used only in the positive sense. James assumed that works are united with faith. The works in James are those works of love for others. These are the works that justify. He never discussed works as pre-conversion, only as post-conversion.

James was speaking to an antinomian “Christian” audience who had already been taught the Gospel,³³ while Paul, in Ephesians, was speaking to many churches.³⁴ His missionary journeys were to non-believers, many of whom were Jewish as well as Gentile. Since it was his “ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ was not known” (Romans 15:20), Paul stressed the negative aspect of works and refuted any merit of pre-conversion works. He attacked a “self-righteous legalism” of Judaism. James refuted the “self-righteous indifference” of the antinomians.³⁵ These differing situations prompted the writers to address their audience in their Epistles the way they did. James stressed the works aspect of faith while Paul stressed the faith aspect. James’ audience had the right belief, but they did not live like it, which is why he stressed that justification was not by faith alone,³⁶ whereas Paul stressed faith alone³⁷ in the context of his audience’s influence of Judaism—acceptance before God was based on the keeping of the law.

Paul emphasized that works did not merit right standing before God. This is why he wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Paul is driving the point that salvation is completely the work of God and no human efforts are effectual. Paul stressed this aspect as a result of his audience, but he also used the term in the positive sense. The confusion occurs when we understand Paul’s use of works only in the negative; we then read into our comparison of Ephesians 2:8-10 and James 2:24 a clear contradiction. But understanding Paul’s positive use of the law, we

³³ C. Ryan Jenkins, 73.

³⁴ Charles R. Erdman, 12.

³⁵ Robert Rakestraw, 34.

³⁶ Jas 2:24; Robert V Rakestraw, 36; Peter Davids, 49.

³⁷ Eph 2:5,8.

can see a clear parallel between James and Paul. This positive use is what James had in mind when he said that justification was not by faith alone. James and Paul used the terms differently while they have the same understanding of the gospel.³⁸

James and Paul assigned different meanings to the terms “faith” and “works,” which fall well within their semantic ranges.³⁹ They both magnified that faith alone justifies. Paul emphasized the inadequacy of works for justification, while James magnified the inadequacy of faith without its necessary production of works. Ephesians 2:8-10 can be restated, “For by grace you have been saved, through a whole-hearted trust in God for the grace required for salvation, which is given independent from any efforts or works of man—it’s the gift of God so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created under His initiative in Christ Jesus for the purpose of doing good works, which God prepared beforehand that we will necessarily walk in them.” And James 2:24 can be restated, “You see that a person is justified by a faith that demonstrates itself through obedience to God and not by an intellectual grasp of orthodoxy alone.” It would seem that Paul would not have opposed James’ statement nor would James have opposed Paul’s. Rather, James and Paul are teaching the same Gospel from different perspectives. They both teach that salvation is by faith alone, but this faith is necessarily demonstrated through good works.

Three Uses of the Law

In reformed theology, the law has a three-fold use. First, the law is to promote righteousness and curb sin. This assumes the sinfulness of man and makes the law a necessary rule. The law is the result of God’s common grace in the world.⁴⁰ The law referred to is not the Old Testament law, but the law written on men’s hearts.⁴¹ This law is for the preservation of the nations in general.

Second, the law is to convict man of sin⁴² and make him aware of the inability to follow its just requirements. The law in this case is the Old Testament law,⁴³ which is used as a teacher⁴⁴ to lead a sinner to Christ so that by faith he can be justified.⁴⁵ The sinner can then be acquiescent to the purpose of redemption.⁴⁶ The Decalogue was given on Mount Sinai to teach the Hebrews that they cannot follow the way of righteousness by works. Rather, this law was to expose their inability to live in accordance to God’s

³⁸ Robert H. Stein, 5.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Louis Berkhof, 614.

⁴¹ Rom 2:14-5.

⁴² Rom 3:20.

⁴³ The Old Testament law is referred to as the Decalogue.

⁴⁴ *paidagôgos*.

⁴⁵ Gal 3:24.

⁴⁶ Louis Berkhof, 614.

standard and drive them to the righteousness found only in Christ by faith. For Christ is the end of the law.⁴⁷ This law does not impart life, but it leads to the One who does.

Third, the law is a rule of life for believers, describing their duties, and leading them in the way to life and salvation.⁴⁸ The law describes the way of holiness that all believers are to follow. This third use is only for the Christian who has already come to the savior by faith alone. It is this third use that Calvin says:

The third and principle use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God, that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit by the law in two ways.⁴⁹

Calvin went on to describe these two ways. First, the law is the “best instrument” to teach the nature of the Lord’s will that every Christian is to seek. And second, it is to exhort every Christian by meditating on it so it can arouse obedience. Calvin describes the law in relation to the flesh as “a whip to an idle and balking ass, to arouse it to work.”⁵⁰

In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul has the second and third use in view. When he uses works in the negative, he has the second use of the law in view. The law was never designed to justify, but in the New Covenant, it is used to expose sin and lead to faith in Christ. It is at this point that Paul levels all meritorious efforts in law keeping. But once faith is established, Paul shifts to the third use of the law. Paul exhorts believers to live a righteous life as described in the Decalogue. The works are performed not for the purpose of salvation, but because of salvation. Works never earned righteousness, rather works display the righteousness already possessed in Christ.

James has only this third use of the law in mind. His audience may have heard a distorted understanding of Paul’s teaching. James demonstrated that the true saving faith that alone justifies is lived out in the following of the law. It is this aspect of the law that his antinomian audience was in error. James was exhorting his readers to follow the law because it was the necessary demonstration of true faith.

Application

Behind every practice is a theory. Practice and theory are two aspects of the same activity; each affects the other. The teachings of James and Paul, as properly

⁴⁷ Rom 10:4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Insts.*, 2.7.12.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

understood, are applicable to the church. Both Apostles are good reminders that a faithful theology must accommodate itself to the specific audience or congregation. For a pastor or teacher, the nature of the circumstance will dictate what to stress in the scripture. Pastors need to contextualize their message. But first, pastors need to understand the context in which the Biblical passage was written and for whom it was intended and why. By understanding this relationship, the pastor can speak meaningfully into his present context. The preaching of God's word will have meaning and power to those who hear.

In those congregations that emphasize "faith alone," while in doctrine are orthodox, but in practice are antinomian, James' stress on works needs to be the emphasis. But, those congregations that are legalistic in their practice, Paul's emphasis needs to be stressed. While stressing the aspect of faith or works can benefit a congregation and edify it, the gospel in all its parts need to be clearly preached. It is Paul who said, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:1-2). The church is to proclaim salvation to all men. In its proclamation, the church must declare, without reservation, the "whole will⁵¹ of God" (Acts 20:27). Every aspect is to be preached with a proper relation to all other aspects. The right "balance" will depend on the congregation, but where the "whole council of God" is preached, balance will reign.

The applications of this principle are limitless, but for the purpose of this task, the teaching of a faith that is animated by works is essential to the preaching of the whole Gospel. The preaching of faith, while neglecting the proper place of works, will lead to the faith James condemned. A faith that is fruitless and dead will result in dead orthodoxy. If the church is filled with those whose faith is dead, then the congregation will be dead. But the preaching that exhorts orthodoxy that is active in works will be a vibrant church; a church that is salt and light in the world. A church that testifies to the grace of God in the lives of His people which let their light shine before men, so that others may see their good deeds and praise God in heaven.⁵²

Modern Protestantism has so emphasized the "faith alone" motto of the Reformation that it minimizes God's call for involvement with the poor, sick, and exploited. Does not the church focus more on its doctrine than its people? Christ is present in the Word and the sacraments, but He is also present with the Christians who suffer. Christ calls the church to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked. After all, it was Jesus who said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Every Christian is called upon to speak the Word and do what is necessary to further God's kingdom and bring Him glory. This is precisely what James and Paul were teaching.

⁵¹ *boulên*, meaning "counsel" or "purpose."

⁵² Matt 5:14-16.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep His commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.
-Ecclesiastes 12:13-*

The proper role of works in the Christian life is essential for a healthy understanding of the Gospel. This work sheds light on the proper place of good works in the life of the believer as they relate to faith. James' Epistle has historically been controversial for its seemingly contradictory discussion on the place of works, especially in 2:24, while Paul's teaching has been normative in Protestant doctrine. This work investigates the relationship between faith and works in James 2:24 and Ephesians 2:8-10, while it maintained the integrity of the infallibility of scripture.

In chapter 5, it is argued that these two Apostles did not contradict, but were fighting different enemies. James was fighting against the antinomian or dead orthodoxy that was prevalent in James' audience. Paul was combating the legalists who tried to add works into the equation of salvation to obligate God. These different contexts provided the arena for the Gospel to be applied in differing ways. Furthermore, James used the terms "faith" and "works" differently from Paul. James was emphasizing to his antinomian audience that "faith alone" was not enough to warrant salvation. James understood that true saving faith was an obedient faith while his audience understood faith to be no more than a confession of the *Shema*. James maintained that faith necessarily produces good works, but good works do not merit salvation. Works, as James used the term, meant post-conversion deeds that flowed from faith, but his audience understood that works were unnecessary. James emphasized that those deeds, which flow from faith, are in accordance with the law of God to demonstrate or "prove" the genuineness of faith.

Paul emphasized "faith" [alone] to his legalistic audience. He wanted to remove the notion that understood pre-conversion works to merit salvation. Salvation was by faith alone independent from works. Yet Paul did not understand "faith" to be simply a confession only as James' audience did. Paul maintained that good works necessarily demonstrate faith. Paul stated that faith is to be expressed through love⁵³ as well as the fact that the Christian was created in Christ for the purpose of performing good works to glory of God's name.⁵⁴

By these differing perspectives, it is understood that James 2:24 does not contradict Paul as understood in Ephesians 2:8-10. Rather, they are in complete agreement with each other. James and Paul were addressing different questions. James was addressing the kind of faith that saves, while Paul was addressing how one is saved.

⁵³ Gal 5:6.

⁵⁴ Eph 2:10.

Both James and Paul together could agree and could conclude that salvation is by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

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