

Paul, James, and Justification: Romans 3:28 and James 2:24

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One of the fascinating things about the Bible is that it is fully divine and fully human. Just as Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human, this Book is also fully divine and fully human. God has revealed Himself to us in these two definitive ways. He has given us a written Word, the Bible. And He has given us His Word in the form of a Person, Jesus Christ. And in each case, God has disclosed Himself to us in a way that involves a perfect union of divinity and humanity. Jesus Christ is the God-Man. He is 100% God and 100% man. Similarly, the Bible is the Book (and the only Book) which has as its author both God and man. This is a wonderful mystery—a mystery that we must affirm without fully comprehending. In the case of Christ's divinity and humanity, we affirm that He is fully God and fully man, and yet our finite minds cannot fully grasp this mystery.

And this is true, not only of the nature of Christ, but also the nature of the Bible. We affirm that the Bible is 100% divine and 100% human. And we continue to stand in awe of the fact that God inspired human beings to write these 66 books which we hold in our hands as one Book. And God did this in such a way that these human beings communicated from their own experience and personality and vocabulary, and at the same time they wrote exactly what God intended to be written. We open up our Bibles to the book of Romans and we say, "God wrote this!" And we're entirely correct. And then we say, "Paul wrote this letter." And, again, we're correct. Because the apostle Paul wrote this letter under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that his words are God's words. 2 Timothy 3:16 says that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." 2 Peter 1:20-21 is also very helpful in understanding the process of inspiration. It says, "no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

I begin this way this morning because we're going to look at a situation where it would appear that two New Testament writers are contradicting each other. But what I hope you'll see in the course of this study is that the Bible is fully human and fully divine. We'll see the humanity of the Bible in the fact that different authors use words in different ways. They address

different situations and sometimes emphasize different issues. But we'll also see the divinity of the Bible in the absolute unity and harmony of its message. There are no contradictions here.

The question I want to deal with this morning is the apparent contradiction (not real contradiction, I will argue, but apparent contradiction) between Paul and James, specifically between Romans 3:28 and James 2:24.

“We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.” This sentence summarizes what our statement of faith says about saving faith. And this sentence has been used often to bring together what the Bible teaches about faith and works. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. Meaning, true, saving faith never exists apart from good works. It always produces good works. And I believe this statement is a very helpful way of remembering this biblical balance. As we look at these passages from Paul and James, this is the answer to the apparent contradiction.

In this sermon I want to focus on a few particular things in each of these passages. I want to ask 3 questions. First, of Paul, and then of James. The questions are: 1) What problem is he addressing? 2) What does he mean by *justified*? 3) What does he mean by *faith*? If James and Paul mean the same thing by the words justify and faith and works, then there certainly is a contradiction between the two. But once we see that they are using the terms justify and faith in different ways, we'll be able to see the harmony between them.

What Problem is Paul Addressing?

Paul is addressing those who think they can gain acceptance with God by keeping the law, by doing the works of the law, by obeying God. Those who think, if I work hard enough and obey God's commands, I'll earn salvation. And Paul is responding to that false notion, and he says, “NO! Works will NOT save you.” A man is justified by *faith* apart from works of the law (3:28). Paul means to attack legalism. And as we learned so clearly last week from that entire paragraph at the end of Romans 3, this truth of justification by faith alone totally excludes boasting. It is not of our doing, and therefore we don't get the credit.

Paul is addressing the problem of legalism and boasting. He is attacking the notion that we can somehow earn a right standing with God through our good behavior.

What Does Paul Mean by *Justified*?

When we look at the word justified here, we understand that Paul is talking about an aspect of what it means to become a Christian. To be justified is to be declared righteous in God's sight. The Greek word for righteousness and the Greek word for justify are from the same root. To justify is to declare righteous. It is a courtroom term. The person who is justified is declared to be righteous in the eyes of the judge. It is a one-time instantaneous act by which God reckons a person righteous in His eyes.

We have seen this in the last two paragraphs of Romans 3, and we'll continue to examine this in even greater detail in Romans 4.

What Does Paul Mean by *Faith*?

I just want to show you briefly that when Paul uses the word faith, he is not speaking of mere mental assent to truth claims. Faith is not less than that, but it is certainly more than that. It is more than agreeing with certain facts. Faith is a deep trust in the Person of Christ, and it is a faith that is living and active. Paul speaks of "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26) and "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6) and "your work of faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11). He exhorts Timothy, "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12). So for Paul, faith is a faith that obeys, a faith that works, a faith that fights against sin.

To summarize, when Paul writes in Romans 3:28 that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law, he is saying that a person is declared righteous in the courtroom of God (in other words, a person becomes a Christian) by trusting in Christ and not by doing any kind of good deeds for God.

Luther's Problem with James

Before we turn to James to ask these same questions, I want you to know that this question of reconciling Paul and James has deeply troubled some very great theologians, most notably, Martin Luther. We know of Luther's delight in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He rejoiced in the truth of Romans 3:28, that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. But when Luther read James 2:24, that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone, he didn't know what to do with it. The only conclusion he could come to was simply to ignore James and focus on Paul. Luther called James "a right strawy epistle," meaning that it might as well just blow away like a piece of straw

in the wind because it had no weight compared to the important books like John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter. Luther saw no way of reconciling James and Paul, and therefore he elevated Paul above James. He said, “Faith justifies (Romans 3:28) stands in flat contradiction to Faith does not justify (James 2:24). If anyone can harmonize these sayings, I’ll put my doctor’s cap on him and let him call me a fool.”

I think Luther was wrong to give up on this problem, and I do believe there is a solution to these verses. What we need to understand is that James and Paul were addressing different problems, and in their different contexts they used the same words in different ways.

What Problem is James Addressing?

James is refuting the idea that a mere profession of faith can save. He is speaking against those who think obedience is not a necessary result of faith. James wants to totally obliterate the idea that a person can have genuine saving faith in Christ and yet remain unchanged. These are the individuals who claim to be Christians, but there’s no fruit in their lives. They have no desire to change. They have no desire to turn away from sin, no desire to pray or read the Bible or go to church, no desire to serve others. James is responding to that kind of person, and he says, “That is NOT possible!”

So Paul and James are fighting very different battles. Paul is refuting those who want to make works part of how a person is saved, and James is refuting those who say that faith doesn’t have to produce works. One commentator says, “they are not antagonists facing each other with drawn swords; they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the Gospel” (Ross). They’re both defending the Gospel, but attacking different errors.

What Does James Mean by *Justified*?

When James uses the word “justified,” he means something different than what Paul means when he uses the same word. This, I believe, is the crux of the problem (that is, the apparent problem). This is why James has been accused of contradicting Paul. This is why James caused Luther so much agony. But this is where we see the beautiful diversity of the Bible. These two human authors, in addressing their particular situations, end up using the same word in different ways. When Paul uses the word justified he is talking about being put into a right relationship with God. He is talking about being declared righteous in God’s sight at the first

moment of faith. It is a one-time event that happens at the start of the Christian life. Paul is talking about becoming a Christian.

James, however, is using the term differently. He's not talking about becoming a Christian, but rather the evidence that shows a person really is a Christian. When James says that a person is justified by works, he doesn't mean that a person becomes a Christian by works. He means that a person is shown to be a Christian by their works. A person is shown to have genuine faith by their works. For example, someone might say, "Justify your actions," meaning "show your actions to be right or appropriate."

The word is also used this way in Matthew 11:19 which says, "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds" (see also Luke 7:35). It's the same word for "justify," and Jesus uses it there to mean that a person's deeds will demonstrate whether or not the person is wise. If wisdom is present, it will become evident in the person's actions. This is how I think James is using the word.

Let me give you 3 brief arguments from the context of James 2 for why I think this is the best way to understand what James is saying. First of all, in verse 21 James refers to Genesis 22, which was a test of Abraham's faith. Abraham trusted God and was counted righteous long before this time, but here his faith is tested and shown to be genuine. In Genesis 22:12 the angel of the Lord stops Abraham and tells him not to sacrifice his son, then says, "now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." By his obedience to God's command, Abraham shows his faith to be real.

Secondly, James 2:23 says, "And the Scripture was fulfilled which says . . ." and then we find the quote from Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness." This is the same verse which Paul quotes in Romans 4, which we'll study next Sunday. And James uses it in the same way Paul uses it, namely, to show that Abraham was saved by faith and not by works. But James is also showing that the spiritual reality of Genesis 15:6 became visible in the obedience of Genesis 22. The spiritual reality that Abraham was saved by faith alone became visible in his clear obedience to God's command in Genesis 22. Abraham was saved by his faith in God, and then his willingness to obey God was evidence that he truly had faith. He did not have a dead faith, but an active and obedient faith. In the words of James, Genesis 15:6 was "fulfilled" in Abraham's willingness to offer up Isaac his son on the altar.

Thirdly, James is concerned throughout this section to convince his readers that faith must show itself in works. He begins the section by saying, “What good is it brothers, if someone *says* he has faith but does not have works. Can that faith save him?” The point is: a mere profession of faith is entirely useless and cannot save. True faith will become visible. It will produce works. Also in verse 18 he responds to an objector, “*show* me your faith apart from your works, and I will *show* you my faith by my works.” Faith must be shown. It must become visible in works. The works are a demonstration of true faith.

For these reasons, I think it’s best to understand James to be speaking of justification in the sense of giving evidence of salvation. He’s not talking about becoming a Christian, but the evidence that shows a person really is a Christian.

What Does James Mean by *Faith*?

Finally, we need to ask what James means by faith. The wording in James 2:24 can be so confusing because we think of the doctrine of the justification by faith alone, and then we read this verse that says “a person is justified by works and not by *faith alone*.” And it seems like James is blatantly denying justification by faith alone. But we’ve already seen that “justified by works” is to be understood in terms of evidence of saving faith. And the other thing to realize from the context is that when James says “faith alone,” he’s not talking about real, saving faith. Rather, he’s referring to the useless faith that he’s been talking about throughout the passage. In verse 17, “faith by itself.” Verse 18, “faith apart from your works.” Verse 20, “faith apart from works.” And now in verse 24, “faith alone.”

So I would paraphrase James 2:24 in this way: “A person is shown to have a genuine, saving faith by works and not by an empty profession.” The point of this verse is the same as the point of the passage as a whole, namely, that a changed life is the proof of genuine faith. A person is justified, shown to be a real believer, by a changed life, and not by mere words.

No Contradiction

And this in no way contradicts Paul’s words in Romans 3:28. Paul said, “a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law,” and he means that a person becomes a Christian, a person is declared righteous in God’s sight, by a true saving faith and not by obeying God.” James is making the complementary point that saving faith is an active, working, visible faith, and that a person

will be shown to be a believer by the *works* that flow from faith, the obedience that flows from faith.

I think that Paul and James use the term “works” in essentially the same way—any obedience to God. Obedience is not part of how we’re declared righteous. But it is a necessary part of our ongoing Christian life.

We are saved by faith alone (that’s Paul’s emphasis in Romans 3:28), but saving faith is never alone (that’s the emphasis in James 2).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made a similar statement. He was a German pastor who lost his life in a Nazi concentration camp, and in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote, “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.” There is a necessary connection between faith and works, between belief and obedience.

Interestingly, even though Luther did not like this passage in James, he certainly understood the truth that James is teaching, that saving faith is active faith. Luther understood that we are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. Listen to what he wrote about this. These words capture what we ought to be looking for in our own lives.

He writes, “O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.”

The Nature of Saving Faith

I want to close this sermon by asking the question, How is it that saving faith produces works? This is an important question, because this is how the biblical teaching on faith and works teaches us a great deal about the nature of true faith. And thus it should give us a way of examining our own hearts. It should show us how to be praying for our own soul, as well as how to pray for others.

What is it about genuine Christian faith that necessarily results in obedience? To use the same biblical example found in James, what was it about Abraham’s faith that caused him to obey

God's very difficult command to sacrifice his own son? Hebrews 11:19 says, "[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." God had promised that He would establish His covenant with Abraham's own son, Isaac. And Abraham had such a confidence in the promises of God that he believed God would bring Isaac back to life in order to uphold His word. That's faith! That's real faith. And where there is faith, there is obedience. The person who trusts God will obey God.

Consider another biblical example of how faith produced radical and sacrificial obedience. I just read from Hebrews 11, how it describes Abraham's faith. Listen also to what Hebrews 11 says about the faith of Moses in verses 24-28, "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them."

Notice what Moses gave up. He gave up the ease and comfort and pleasure of being the son of Pharaoh's daughter. All kinds of earthly pleasures would have been available to him, but he rejected them. And instead, he accepted the hard lot of being identified with his people, the Israelites. He turned his back on all the things this world would consider desirable, and he chose a life of mistreatment and disgrace. And what is the explanation for this? Why did he do it?

Because of his faith! Because he had a profound hope in God, and he saw that the pleasure of following the Lord is far greater than the fleeting pleasures of sin. Moses had before him two options. On the one hand, comfort, ease and worldly pleasure. On the other hand, persecution, trials and hardship. Through the eyes of unbelief one would surely be enticed by the pleasures of Egypt. But when you look at the choice through the eyes of faith and hope in God, the options appear differently. Because through the lens of faith, it becomes clear that the pleasure of sin lasts only for a very short time. But obedience to God leads to a treasure that all the gold in Egypt cannot even begin to compare to.

Do you see the connection between faith and obedience? When a person truly trusts in God, that person will see the pleasure of knowing God and obeying Him. We will recognize that there is far more joy to be found in living according to God's statutes than

in living according to the ways of the world. This is how saving faith necessarily produces good works. It's because saving faith is not just something that happens in our mind or in our will, but it also reaches down into our desires. And the person who has truly been changed by God, whose heart has been circumcised (as we studied at the end of Romans 2) . . . that person will *want* to obey, and therefore *will* obey.

God's people obey. God's people don't just go through the motions. They truly strive to keep God's commands. Not as a way of trying to earn God's favor, but as an eager pursuit of God, Himself. A person who has been changed by God is a person who will taste the delight of obeying God, and therefore will *want* to obey God.

So let's test ourselves with these truths, brothers and sisters. Let's examine our hearts and pray for real faith, deep and abiding faith, faith that produces a solid hope in God, faith that produces joyful obedience to God.

The Bible is such an astounding book, as we've seen this morning in comparing two passages that may appear at first to be contradictory. The Scriptures are fully divine and fully human. There is unity and diversity. And there is one Gospel message. I hope this study inspires in you great confidence in God's Word. And I hope these passages will spur all of us on toward a living and active faith in the promises of God.