

Justification in James 2

📖 James 2

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📅 September 21, 2014

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We're studying Romans 3-4 and the great doctrine of justification. What has Paul said? In 3:21 he said that there is a righteousness of God available to us apart from the Law. In 3:22 he said this righteousness comes to all who believe in Jesus Christ. In 3:23 he says this is the only way because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In 3:24 he says that we are justified as a gift by His grace through the redemptive work of Christ Jesus who in 3:25 God displayed publicly on the cross as a propitiation in His blood. This was to demonstrate that God is righteous because in past times He was passing over the sins previously committed, so that when Christ came and paid the redemption price 3:26 says God would be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. In verse 27, since it is by grace through faith in Christ then where is boasting? It is excluded. On what basis? The law of faith. In 3:28 this justification is again stated to be apart from works of the Law. In 3:29-30 this is true for Jews and Gentiles because there is but one God. In 3:31, did this nullify the usefulness of the Law? By no means. It actually establishes the usefulness of the Law since it shows us our sin. In 4:1 Paul turns to illustrations of justification by grace through faith. Abraham is the father of Israel and lived before the Law was given. What did Abraham find? In 4:2, if he was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. No one can boast before God because justification before God is by faith. And 4:3 shows that what Abraham found was that justification was by faith. For what does the Scripture say, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." This notice is given in Gen 15:6 to show that Abraham was justified prior to God coming into a covenant with Him. Abraham was not justified because of the covenant. Abraham was justified by faith when he lived in Ur long before he went to Haran and then to the Promised Land. In 4:4 we have absolute clarity that justification before God is not by works, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due." And in 4:5 with equal clarity we are taught that justification before God is by faith. "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." According to verse 5 both the faith and the justification occur to an individual who is ungodly, not godly. A man believes and God justifies a man while he is still ungodly. In 4:5 Paul gives the second illustration of justification by grace through faith. David is the great king of Israel and lived after the Law

was given. In 4:6 David spoke of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: In 4:7-8 Paul quotes what David said in Ps 32:1-2 most likely after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, saying, "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." David knew that the only basis for his restoration to fellowship was the fact that legally he was already justified before God by grace through faith. Therefore he pronounces blessing on the man who has that legal declaration made of him.

Today, if we could summarize the key truth in this section what would it be? That justification before God is by faith alone *apart* from works. The key is *apart* from works. Note in 3:21 it is "apart from the Law;," in 3:28 it is "apart from works of the Law;" and in 4:6 it is "apart from works." The key word is "apart" which in the Greek in all three places is the preposition *χωρίς* (*choris*) with the genitive case. In the lexicon it means "pertaining to the absence or lack of something, *without, apart from, independent(ly of)*" and is placed in the lexicon with the heading "genitive of a thing," and says, "*without relation to or connection with something, independent(ly) of something.*"¹ Justification before God is by a faith that is completely independent, having no relationship to works. That's the exegesis of the passage and the only exegesis of the passage.

Now the great debate turns to James 2 and this is where every Roman Catholic turns because he says there are other passages and we have to take other passages into account and so hold your place here and turn to James 2:24. Note verse 24, we're deliberately taking it out of context at this time. James says, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." So which is it now? Paul says that a man is justified by faith apart from works; James says that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. This appears to be a contradiction between James and Paul. Before we can be sure, however, we need to define a contradiction. We'll use one of Aristotle's definitions of non-contradiction, not because we depend upon Aristotle but because it is a workable definition. He actually had three definitions that applied to three different disciplines and we'll use the one that applied to beliefs. Here he said, "It is impossible to hold (suppose) the same thing to be and not to be (*Metaph IV 3 1005b24 cf. 1005b29-30*)."² That is, to say here, when applied to justification, that it is impossible to hold that it is by faith apart from works and not by faith apart from works. There does seem then to be a direct contradiction.

How is this to be resolved? There have been three answers. First, the Roman Catholic view is that Paul in Romans 3-4 is teaching that justification *begins* with faith and James is teaching that justification progresses from that point forward by works. Remember, in Catholic theology that justification is defined as the process of transformation and sanctification of the individual into a righteous person. Using the dung analogy of Martin Luther justification would refer to the process of transforming the dung into snow. So their attempt to harmonize James and Paul is essentially a chronological one,

separating in time the beginning of justification which is by faith in Paul from the continuing process of justification which is by works in James. When seen as a whole however, the Catholic doctrine of justification is by faith and works and so is hard pressed to genuinely explain what Paul means by faith apart from works. A major repercussion of the Catholic view is that it puts off genuine assurance of salvation until one has actually become righteous and except for those who reach the status of saint in that church that does not occur until the person has gone to purgatory to have the remaining remnants of sin burned away.

Second, the Lordship Salvation view is that Paul in Romans 3-4 is teaching that justification is by faith alone and James is clarifying that the faith that justifies is never alone but always results in works. This is perhaps a little better than the Catholic view in that it does hold that justification is a legal declaration of God made at the moment of faith. Their attempt to harmonize James and Paul is essentially a clarifying one; James is clarifying what Paul meant by faith, that is, a faith that works. That, however, is a weak argument because James wrote many years before Paul. It also falls short because it is forced to invent the foggy area of different kinds of faith. Consequently it leaves one wondering, did I have the right kind of faith and now I am not looking at the object of my justification which is Christ but my faith and the only way I can know if I had the right kind of faith is to see if I persevere in good works until the end of my life. So a major repercussion of the Lordship view is that, like the Catholic view, it puts off genuine assurance of salvation until the end.

Third, the Free Grace view is that Paul in Romans 3-4 is teaching that justification before God in tense one of salvation is by faith alone and James is teaching that justification before men in tense two of salvation is by works. Paul wants to explain to his audience how a man is justified before God. James wants to explain to his audience the importance of applying our faith in the arena of man to do good works. This attempt to harmonize James and Paul is essentially one of audience in view; Paul is referring to a justification before God who looks at a man's heart and can see faith and James is referring to a justification before man who looks only at man's works. This view then maintains that there are two distinct justifications; a justification before God that is by faith apart from works, Paul's concern, and a justification before men that is by works, James' concern. This view seems to me to be the best.

How do we get to this view? From a very strict interpretive procedure. What I mean is that there is often abuse of the principle that *Scripture interprets Scripture*. I've basically boiled the problem down between these two passages as an abuse of that principle. This principle has been variously defined. In more modern times it is defined as "Scripture is its own best interpreter." That is a very unfortunate distortion of the principle because it leads one to think that the proper way to interpret is to let James explain Paul or vice versa. That is not at all proper. The Reformers called this principle the *analogy of faith*. What the principle essentially states is that every passage of Scripture when properly interpreted will be in perfect

harmony with every other passage. However, as I inferred before, the principle is abused when it is brought into the interpretive process. In other words, the principle is not saying that Paul must be used to interpret James and James must be used to interpret Paul. The principle is saying that when Paul is understood independent of James and James is understood independent of Paul then the results will harmonize! Remember that Paul and James are writing to two different audiences for two different purposes and their letters therefore stand on their own independent of one another. Paul wrote to the Roman believers in order to give them a systematic explanation of the gospel prior to his arrival; James wrote to Jewish believers in order to teach them how to persevere through trials living by faith. So as far as the proper interpretive procedure the rule is the analogy of faith and that rule means in this case that when Paul is properly interpreted and James is properly interpreted then James and Paul will be in perfect harmony with one another.

When we come to exegesis we are talking about applying this rule in a rigorous fashion. So our interest here is to exegete Paul and James individually, taking into consideration the grammar, the historical background and any cultural or geographical issues that may serve a role in informing the meaning. After we have discovered the meaning and reached a conclusion about what each man is teaching then we apply the analogy of faith to see how James and Paul may or may not relate. So the analogy of faith is only considered after the exegesis has been completed. My criticism in how people are dealing with these two passages is that they are bringing the analogy of faith into the exegetical process rather than putting it at the end and therefore they are trying to reconcile the two apparently paradoxical passages before really finding out what either one of them means. This error is committed by both Roman Catholicism and Lordship Salvation on the James and Paul issue. Their different interpretations could be avoided if they exhausted the exegesis of each passage individually before applying the analogy of faith. All Scripture does harmonize but only when properly interpreted. Robert Thomas, in his great work *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, cautions against short-ending the exegetical process by bringing the analogy of faith into that process when he says, "The analogy of faith finds its proper use at the conclusion of the exegetical process as a double check on the accuracy of exegesis rather than at the beginning of the process as a preunderstanding that will adversely affect the accuracy of the exegesis."³ What is happening is people are allowing their preunderstanding to come into the passage and that colors their understanding of the text. I have found that this is one of the most common exegetical mistakes people make. The other is word studies and inserting meanings of words that are valid but not in that context. Consciously, for years now, I have made it a practice to not allow the analogy of faith to help me interpret a passage, but instead use it merely as a check after the exegesis is completed. I have done this with both Romans 3-4 and James 2 and will show you that these two passages are referring to two different audiences and two different tenses of salvation and therefore do not conflict according to Aristotle's definition of a contradiction or any other definition I'm aware of. Romans 3-4 refers to

justification before God in tense one of salvation and James 2 refers to justification before men in tense two of salvation. Therefore they are both true and do not in any way contradict.

We taught James through verse by verse several years ago. There are six lessons that cover James 2:14-26 in the book study so I will by no means be able to be that exhaustive today. On another occasion I taught two lessons specifically on James 2:14-26. All of these lessons are available in the church audio library. Today I will teach one lesson on James and by that one lesson you will see the tragedy of confusion that has flooded the world with respect to James and Paul and how Satan has used it to obfuscate the doctrine of justification beyond recognition.

First, we need to consider who James was writing to and why he was writing them? In short he was writing believers to instruct them how to persevere through trials. James 1:3, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." In other words, our faith is going to be tested. The question is what is our faith? Here it is our belief system; it is the set of doctrines that compose the Christian faith. What James is saying is that we are going to be tested in order to see if we will apply the doctrines of the Christian faith and thereby persevere through our trials in the process of spiritual growth. So the book is addressing tense two of salvation, what we typically refer to as sanctification. Notice 1:12 the wonderful results of a believer persevering under trial. "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." What's the blessing for persevering under trial? Rewards. Clearly rewards are being mentioned as an incentive for believers to persevere in tense two of salvation. Notice also 1:18 that they are clearly believers, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." The audience is clearly believers; they've been brought forth by the word of truth so that they have become a kind of first fruits among His creatures. Also note the instruction in verse 19, "This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger." There is his chief instruction in a time of trial and wouldn't you say that he is instructing a believer how to handle his trials in tense two of salvation? Of course. Don't become angry, relax, listen! Verse 20, "for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." Now the word righteousness has been used and what kind of righteousness is James talking about here? What's the context? Is it a legal situation before God or is a practical situation before men? It's a practical situation. You're in a trial; don't get mad because that doesn't meet the righteous standards of God. So practical righteousness is in view and that is an issue that everyone in this room needs to be crystal clear on. James is not talking about legal righteousness before God. He's talking about practical righteousness, practical living. The word righteousness can refer to either legal righteousness (as it does in Rom 3-4) or to practical righteousness (as it does here in James 1). How do we know which use is in view? We just look at the

context. That's the first rule of all interpretation; context, context, context. What's the context? Being quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger in a tense situation. So the context is clearly practical righteousness. Verse 21 affirms this conclusion, "Therefore, putting aside all filthiness." To put aside all filthiness is to put off sinful behavior. So clearly practical righteousness is what James desires to see in their lives. This is an issue in tense two of salvation, it is not an issue of tense one and how a man gets a right standing with God. Verse 21 goes on to instruct these believers on how to overcome the dangers of sin in their Christian life, "in humility" James says, "receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls." Your souls seems to throw people when they read the Bible. They start thinking heaven and hell talk. But we use SOS all the time and it refers to a physical deliverance! What save our souls refers to is defined by the context. What's the context? Salvation in tense two; salvation from the deadly consequences of sin. Note verse 22, these believers needed to become doers of the word and not hearers only. They heard the word, they had doctrine but they weren't applying it to the details of life. And in that case, verse 26 says it's worthless. In other words, you can have all the doctrine in the world but if you don't apply it, it's worthless. His point is they didn't have any practical righteousness to go along with their theology. Verse 27 gives an example of practical righteousness. They didn't visit orphans and widows and keep themselves unstained by the world. That would be practical righteousness in tense two of salvation. Same thing continues in 2:1ff. What were they doing at Church? Showing favoritism to the rich and disregarding the poor. Is that applying the Christian faith? No. What kind of faith is that? It's a dead faith, it's worthless or valueless. You may have doctrine but you're not applying it. Were they passing the test? No. They were failing the test. They were believers, that's not the issue; the issue is were they meeting the tests of life by doing the word of God or were they merely hearers only? Hearers only, they needed to become doers. 2:14 starts with two questions and what do you think these two questions from the context are concerned with? Practical righteousness. Not concerned at all with legal righteousness. We're talking in the context of James with respect to practical righteousness, application of the Christian faith. James asks, "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" The obvious answer is no. Save him from what? The same thing as salvation back in 1:21, salvation of the soul from the deadly consequences of sin. Salvation in tense two. All James is asking is whether a believer who has doctrine but doesn't apply the doctrine, can that doctrine save him from the consequences of sin? And the obvious answer is no. You have to apply it for it to be useful. That this is the proper meaning is perfectly clear from 2:15. Here's a very practical situation; "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?" Well it's no use. Here's a test, a Christian is faced with a test of helping a fellow brother or sister in Christ and they're cold and you say you have Christian doctrine, the faith, but you don't apply it to a fellow brother or sister's need, what use is it to have all that Christian doctrine? It's not doing anything for them. It's not helping them. It's worthless.

Explanation verse 17, "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." Dead in what sense? In the sense that it's not vital. It's not helping anyone. There's no practical righteousness. This has no relationship to whether you have imputed righteousness before God, it has to do whether there is any practical righteousness in your life before men, just helping a brother or sister in need! Now verse 18 introduces a hypothetical objector. In other words, James expects that someone in his audience will object to his claim that true doctrine ought to have a practical expression in our lives. Note how James introduces this hypothetical objector. "But someone may say," note it does not say "well say." The word *well* is not in the original. If it was it would imply that what is said here by this objector is not objecting to James but agreeing with James. That is an interpretation built into the translation that is false. This person is not in agreement with James. This person is teaching the opposite of James. So before we look at it let's be clear what James is teaching? James is saying that a believer who has the faith, has Christian doctrine, ought to apply that doctrine so that there is practical righteousness toward helping fellow believers in need. He's saying there is a connection between Christian beliefs and practical expressions of those beliefs. The objector is saying the opposite of James. He's saying there is no connection between Christian beliefs and actions. Someone may say, "There is no practical expression of righteousness just because of certain beliefs I may have." That's the heart of the objection and you can see that that objection continues through verse 19 because verse 20 is when James pipes back in and refers to the objector as a foolish fellow. So whatever is said in verses 18-19 is false doctrine. You wouldn't want to get truth out of verses 18-19. And yet how many times have you heard a Bible teacher build true doctrine out of verse 19, "Oh, they had only the belief of demons, they're not a real believer." Do they not realize that those words come from the mouth of a foolish fellow? You can't build true doctrine out of verses 18-19. These verses are expressing false doctrine out of the mouth of someone who objects to James teaching that there is a practical and identifiable expression of our faith. This foolish fellow rejects that. He says verse 18, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." What's his point? It can't be done. It's sarcasm and he's making fun of James. He's saying there is no connection between my Christian beliefs and my actions. His example is verse 19, "You believe that God is one." Is that a Christian doctrine? Yes. He says, "you do well;" It's good to be a monotheist. Then he tries to show that just because you believe in the Christian doctrine of monotheism it doesn't mean there is a practical righteous expression of that doctrine. His example is from the demons, "the demons also believe [God is one], and shudder." In other words, they are monotheists and yet they do not have a practical righteousness because of that belief, instead, they just shudder. So the objector thinks he has proved to James that there is no connection between Christian doctrine and practical righteous expressions of that doctrine. In verse 20 James rejects that line of reasoning by calling the objector a foolish fellow and challenging him to recognize something, "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?" For a demon to believe that God is one and yet have no practical expression of righteousness in response to

that truth is completely useless. So then James is insisting that we practically express our doctrinal beliefs in order to show the value of those beliefs. Otherwise, if we don't express them, what difference does it make? If we don't apply what we've learned, who cares? He now gives two examples of practical righteousness to refute his opponent, the first is Abraham and the second is Rahab. These are very interesting selections. Neither was perfect in experience but they could hardly be at further ends of the spectrum. However, what both of these were believers share is the fact that they were in a trial situation and demonstrated practical righteousness by applying doctrine they knew. In other words, they were in a jam, they took some doctrine they knew and they applied it in a practical way. The result was that their justification before God met its intended goal and it vindicated them before men. The first example in verse 21 is Abraham. Speaking of an event that happened with his son Isaac some 50 years after the Gen 15:6. Notice that Abraham had believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness - there was a justification by works. So the justification by works occurred 50 years later. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" The required answer in the Greek is, yes he was. There was a justification by works that occurred at that time. Now the justification by works is a practical righteousness that was displayed, it is not a legal righteousness. The legal righteousness had been imputed 50 years earlier when Abraham believed. This practical expression of righteousness came forth long after. Verse 22, "You see that faith was working with his works," that expression is describing when we have a belief, some doctrine that we have learned, and we apply it. What belief did Abraham have about Isaac? That God would raise up his seed through Isaac. It was through Isaac that his descendants would be named. That was revealed to Abraham sometime after he believed, at least 14 years after he believed. So if Abraham had that belief and then he was instructed to kill Isaac then he must have reasoned that if I kill this son, my only begotten son, then God will either raise him from the dead or resuscitate him because God promised that through this son my descendants will be named. And therefore what James is showing with Abraham is that there is a connection between what Abraham believed and the practical expression of that belief. When that happened there was a justification by works, a practical righteousness was displayed in tense two of salvation. And the end of verse 22 says, "and as a result of the works, faith was perfected," or better, the Greek word is *τελειωω* and means "to reach a goal or purpose." The doctrine or belief that Abraham had that God would raise up his seed through Isaac met its intended goal or aim, which was for Abraham to apply that belief in the test with Isaac and when he did the doctrine met its intended goal, which was a practical expression of that doctrine. Verse 23, and this is the big place people fail to understand, "and the Scripture was fulfilled which says," and then he quotes none other than Gen 15:6 which occurred some 50 years before the offering of Isaac. What is James doing and why would he quote an event that occurred some 50 years before? What James is saying is that the original declaration of righteousness that had occurred some 50 years before had a designed end to it, had a purpose and that purpose was that there would be a practical expression of righteousness in this world. In other words, God justifies us

before Himself in heaven for a purpose and that purpose or aim is that in our lives when we meet trials, we apply the doctrine we've learned and we overcome those trials by a practical expression of that doctrine in the details of life. James is really teaching a simple concept but people have read their 21st century theology back into this passage and quite frankly, hardly anyone realizes the value of this passage so far as just practical Christian living. Now note at the end of verse 23 what Abraham was called *after*, not before, *after* he offered up Isaac as a practical expression of righteousness. "and he was called the friend of God." To be called "the friend of God" is a reward for practical service in the Christian life. God calls us a child at the moment of faith, a son as we are growing to maturity and a friend when we have become mature. The mature believer has learned to apply the doctrine he has learned in an intense testing situation and by it his justification before God has met its intended aim or goal, a justification before men. That is as simple as I can put it. Verse 24 says, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." In other words, the objector said that there is but one justification and that is by faith alone and I neither can nor need to show practical righteousness thereafter. James says no, "The intended goal of the first legal justification before God is that there be a second practical justification before men. Rahab goes on to show the exact same thing. When she met a trial situation she recalls the doctrine she knew as a believer and it's all documented in the Book of Joshua that she believed that YHWH was able to save and deliver her because He had delivered the Israelites from the greatest superpower on earth, Egypt, and therefore she applied that doctrine and lived, another justification by works before men.

James 2 in no way contradicts Romans 3-4. Romans 3-4 is talking about justification before God which is always by faith apart from works in heaven, whereas James 2 is talking about justification by works before men as the intended aim or goal of our original justification before God by faith. The two justifications must be kept distinct. It is not, as the Catholics say, that justification begins by faith but continues by works. Nor is it as many Protestants say, that it is justification by faith alone but the faith that justifies is never alone but always accompanied by works. It is rather that a man is justified before God by faith alone and then when trials come along God's desire is that we apply the doctrine that we have learned and be justified by works before men by a practical expression of righteousness.

¹ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1095.

² <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-noncontradiction/>

³ Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, p 64.