

James, Paul, and Justification: James 2:14-26
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The Bible is an amazing Book! The Bible is breathtaking to behold, when we consider what it truly is. The Bible is the very Word of God! It is God's self-revelation of Himself to us. In the words of this Book that we hold in our hands, God tells us who He is and what He has done. The Bible is astounding in so many ways. The Bible not only gives us accurate historical information about the most important events that have occurred in this universe, but it also provides us with God's interpretation of those events—God's purpose and plan in the things He has done. The Bible reveals God's plan of redemption. It shows us our sin and our guilt and the punishment we deserve for our sin, and then it points us to the only way that we can be forgiven of sin, which is through Jesus Christ. We must not take this Book for granted. It is a treasure of joy and peace and life. We should be in awe of the fact that God has given us this revelation of Himself, and as we pour over these writings we should continually be in awe of the beauty and complexity and simplicity and inexhaustibility of the Bible.

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. You see, 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 grasp this mystery. We strive for greater knowledge, and we will do so for eternity, but these realities are so much bigger than us. 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. And therefore we open up our Bibles to the book of James and we say, "God

wrote this!” And we’re entirely correct. And then we saw, “James wrote this letter.” And, again, we’re correct. Because the man James 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.

Before we look at the passages in James 2 and in Romans 3-4, we need to be reminded that words are very interesting things. Words are our means of communication. Words are what we have to work with. And when two different individuals use words to communicate ideas, those two individuals may very well use some of the same words but with different meanings. And I’m not talking about words just meaning whatever you want them to mean. I’m simply saying that many words can carry different meanings in different contexts.

This has been a fun thing to try to explain to our young kids as they slowly discover how language works. For instance, they’ve learned that when you say the word “chilly,” you might mean that you’re kind of cold and you need to put on a sweatshirt. Or, you might say the same exact thing, but this time you’re talking about something that we eat for dinner sometimes (something that has ground beef and red beans in it). Or, there’s also the possibility that you’re talking about a South American country. Of course, if those words are in written form, we know what they refer to apart from context. But if they are spoken, we need the context to define them, because each word sounds the same. So if my 5-year-old daughter says to me on a February morning, “I’m chilly,” I don’t take her to mean that she’s claiming to be a South American country. I know what she means because of the context in which it was said. The point is that context is so important. And that is what we’ll see as we wrestle with the relationship between James 2 and Romans 3-4.

So let's start by reading those passages together. You might want to hold your place in both of these books this morning, because we'll be flipping back and forth as we compare them. I'll start by reading James 2:14-26. I preached on this passage last week. We looked at Dead Faith, and Demon Faith, and then Active Faith. I plan on preaching on this passage one more time next week, to look further at the necessity of good works in the Christian life. The statement that I repeated several times last week, and I'll say it again this morning, is "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 that is what James is laboring to communicate in these verses.

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 statements to the door of the Roman Catholic church in Wittenberg, Germany. He did not realize that his actions that day would result in what we now call the Protestant Reformation. His desire was not to leave the Roman Catholic Church, but to reform it. However, he was excommunicated from the church, because he would not recant the convictions that he had come to which were based on the Word of God.

The main issue in this whole controversy was the doctrine of justification by faith alone—the biblical truth that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by works. Martin Luther's own life was changed dramatically and irreversibly when he came to see this truth in Scripture. He had not always understood it. He thought that he had to be good enough. He had no peace in life, because he was constantly plagued by the knowledge that he could not live up to God's standard. As hard as he tried to be holy and blameless in God's sight, there was no way he could do it. He was a sinner, as we all are, and he knew it. But he didn't know what the solution was, other than try harder and harder to be good enough.

Everything changed for him as he studied the book of Romans. The pivotal verses were Romans 1:16-17, which say, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

Luther had been taught that "the righteousness of God" was the wrath of God—the judgment of God. And therefore he hated this teaching. He hated what he understood to be the Gospel, because he thought it simply meant, If you don't live up to God's standard, you'll be punished. That's the pressure and discouragement that Luther lived with day after day. And many

people live with that same kind of pressure today, although I doubt that many have such a sensitive awareness of their own sin as Luther did.

As Luther studied this passage in Romans 1, and as he wrestled to understand Paul's meaning, he finally saw that the righteousness of God is the righteousness that is given to us by faith. This verse is not talking about God's judgment and wrath. It is talking about a gift that God gives to those who have faith in Him. And the gift is God's righteousness, the righteousness achieved by Christ's perfect life, and it is imputed to us. It is credited to our account. It is counted as ours. So even though we are wretched sinners, as Luther understood so well, by faith we can receive the amazing gift of righteousness. This is the Gospel. This is the Good News!

In the verses from Romans 3-4 which I read a moment ago, this truth that we are justified by faith (and by faith *alone*) is taught so clearly. This was so precious to Luther, and it is so precious to each and every one of us who is in Christ. Jesus Christ died in our place. He paid our debt. He suffered our punishment. He forgives our sin. And the way that we receive that forgiveness is not by works. We cannot work for it. But rather, it is by faith. It is by the simple and yet profound act of resting in Him—trusting Him, loving Him, hoping in Him, believing His promises.

Now, to understand this passage in Romans better and to prepare us to go back and compare it to James, I want to focus on a few particular things. I want to ask 3 questions, and when we go to James in a moment, we'll ask the same 3 questions again. 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 Jews of his day who thought they could gain acceptance with God by keeping the law—by doing works of the law (being circumcised, keeping the dietary laws, keeping the Sabbath, etc.). They thought, if I work hard enough and obey God's commands, I'll earn salvation. And Paul is responding passionately 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).

What Does Paul Mean by *Justified*?

When we look at the word justified here, we understand that Paul is talking about 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 legal term. It is a courtroom term. The person who is justified is declared to be righteous in the eyes of the court. It is a one-time instantaneous act by which God counts us righteous in His eyes.

Look at how Romans 4 describes this, and notice that there is something that is credited and something else that is NOT credited. In verses 7-8 we see that sin is the thing that is NOT credited. This person is greatly blessed, whose sins are not counted against him. So one piece of justification is having our sins no longer credited against us. They are removed. They're forgiven. They are covered. And then, positively, righteousness is credited to us. This is mentioned throughout Romans 4. I'll just point out the instances found in these verses that we've already read. Verses 3, 5, 6. This is the glorious reality of justification by faith alone apart from works. The guilty charge is removed, and it is replaced by the declaration, "Righteous!" 2 Corinthians 5:21 shows the two sides of this transaction in a very succinct way. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

There are two exchanges here. First of all, our sin is placed on Christ. And secondly, His righteousness is placed on us. And this all happens when a person puts their trust in Jesus. We are united to Christ, and our sin is credited to Him on the cross, where He pays the full debt for our sin. And then His perfect obedience is credited to us. As a result of this exchange, we are no longer under God's wrath. We are no longer His enemy. But now we are in a right relationship with Him. We have peace with God. God now looks at us as righteous on the basis of Christ. We are justified, declared righteous in God's sight because of Christ's righteousness. And this happens by faith alone apart from works.

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. 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) 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

Now we go back to James 2, and we'll ask the same 3 questions. But before we do that, I want you to feel the difficulty of the problem we're dealing with this morning. I want you to know that it has deeply troubled some very great theologians, most notably, Martin Luther. I told you about 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 saying, 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 clear 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. This is the person whom we meet all-to-often who says, "Yeah, I'm a Christian. I trusted Christ last year, or 10 years ago, or 30 years ago." But there's no fruit in the person's life. 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).

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 is the crux of the 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. As we saw in Romans 3-4, 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 thing 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. We use the word in this sense very commonly. A person might say, "Justify your actions," meaning "show your actions to be right or appropriate." Or, if a person is accused of a crime, but then the evidence proves that the person is innocent, we would say that the person was "justified" (or vindicated), meaning the person was shown to be innocent. The word is also used this way in the Bible. For instance, Matthew 11:19 "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." It's the same word that is used here, and it means 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 exactly 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’s faith is shown 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.” Do you see the connection that James is making between Genesis 15:6, which he quotes in verse 23, and Genesis 22, which he refers to in verse 21? His point is that the spiritual reality of Genesis 15:6 became visible in the obedience of Genesis 22. Abraham believed God and was counted righteous (Genesis 15:6) and that saving faith became clearly evident in the obedience of Genesis 22. 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? 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 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.

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 working for 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.

Again we come back to our slogan: 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).

The Bible is such an astounding book. It is fully divine and fully human. There is unity and diversity. And this morning we've seen a unified, coherent message arising even from language that seems, at first glance, to be a flat contradiction. This should inspire great confidence in God's Word. And it should inspire awe in our hearts at what God has done—that He used these mere men to give us His eternal Truth.

In closing, as we consider the message of both James and Paul, I want to ask you where your hope is? Are you placing your hope in the assumption that you are living a pretty good life? You assume that your morality is better than average, and therefore you deserve to go to heaven. You think that your "good deeds," (which in reality are filthy rags) . . . you think that they are going to save you? Paul warns us that this is a false hope. Your good deeds will NOT save you. Only faith in Jesus Christ saves.

On the other hand, you may be placing your hope in the fact that you once prayed a prayer to receive Christ. There was a Sunday when you walked to the front of a church and spoke with a pastor, or you filled out a response card at an evangelistic rally, or you had an emotional experience at a youth camp. And today your life is no different than it was then, but you are holding on to the hope that you will go to heaven someday because of that profession of faith you made so long ago. James warns us so clearly that a mere profession, without any fruit, is worthless and will not save anyone.

Your good deeds will not save you. Your mere profession will not save you. Repent of your sins, and trust in Jesus. And you will be saved.