

# FAITH THAT WORKS

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*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, May 19, 2019*

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Some church people like to argue. And their discussion involve some of the silliest matters!

For instance:

- One church had a dispute because the Lord's Supper had cran/grape juice instead of grape juice. *(Of course it should be grape juice. It's right there in Azariah 4:11.)*
- Another reported fights over the type of coffee to serve—Starbucks or Peet's. *(They might have just started a new church, called The Right Blend Fellowship.)*
- There was an argument over whether the church should allow deviled eggs at the church meal *(Only if it's balanced with angel food cake for dessert).*
- Another disagreement arose over using the term "potluck" instead of "pot blessing," *(I get it! The concept of luck contradicts the theology of a sovereign God. This issue is very serious. Good luck trying to resolve it.)*
- There was even a dispute over whether the church should allow people to wear black t-shirts, since black is the color of the devil *(Are you sure he's not red? That's what I've heard.)*
- Add to these the all too common battles over worship and music style or instruments, the volume of music in services, proper attire for church services, and the length of the pastor's beard.

To people outside the church, this all seems foolish and a good reason to stay away from those crazy Christians. The problem is, to people inside the church, it may seem reasonable! While we should be humiliated by such pettiness, instead we self-righteously claim God's backing for our preferences!

Of course, there have been many more serious discussions over what is sound doctrine. Most of these have been around for ages, and seem to resurface in each generation. That's not necessarily bad, because each generation of Christ-followers needs to learn discern truth from tradition.

How do you discern truth from error? By what means?

By what feels good? That's unreliable!

By what most people think or do? Also unreliable!

By what the Scriptures say? That's trustworthy, but sometimes the Scriptures seem to say different things!

For instance over the last two millennia, church people have spent a lot of time arguing about this issue: Are we justified by faith or works?

The extremes may be described like this:

- Faith alone in Jesus Christ saves us. (There is no other Savior, and He responds in grace to your faith.)
- Works alone in Jesus' name save us. (You must earn your salvation by your efforts to live like Jesus.)

The two may be presented as mutually exclusive, but this suggests that the two are opposites. Nothing could be further from the truth!

What if faith alone was all that mattered? What could that look like...?

An excuse for laziness

An excuse for worldliness

A coverup for sin

What if works alone were all that mattered? What could that look like...?

An excuse for legalism

An excuse for criticism

A coverup for self-righteousness

To add confusion to this discussion, "work" is both verb and noun, but "faith" is only noun. Therefore, faith may *seem passive*, while work, clearly, is active. We must ask ourselves: Is passive faith enough?

This conflict of ideas has been laid at the feet of Paul and James.

Paul, the preacher of "faith alone," who stated clearly, "*Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies [absolves] the ungodly, his faith is reckoned [credited] as righteousness*" (Romans 4:5).

James, the preacher of "works alone." "*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*" (James 2:24)

Since Paul wrote the bulk of the New Testament letters, and his letters to the churches were the catalyst for the Reformation in 1517 (the breakaway from some non-Biblical traditions of

the Roman Catholic Church), some have suggested that the Letter from James does not belong in the Bible.

However, whenever you encounter an apparent contradiction, it's good to keep in mind a basic rule: Always first explore the possibility of a reconciliation between the two. Not all statements that appear to contradict actually do. (And that's good advice for apparent contradictions in your relationships, also!)

Words can have more than one meaning or application. Understanding which one is meant is critical to getting along, or to knowing the truth.

Curiously, both Paul and James referred to Abraham as the basis for their teaching.

Paul:

*Romans 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has discovered regarding this matter? 4:2 For if Abraham was declared righteous by the works of the law, he has something to boast about—but not before God. 4:3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4:4 Now to the one who works, his pay is not credited due to grace but due to obligation. 4:5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

Paul makes two points here. First, if Abraham is justified by works, if salvation is his personal accomplishment, dependent on his effort alone, then he can brag about it. Second, any system of works makes God indebted to the one who qualifies. Salvation is not a gift, but a wage paid to the one who earns it.

Then Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 to prove that neither is the case: *"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*

"Credited" means God gifted righteousness to Abraham, deposited it to Abraham's account. This happened early in Abraham's life.

The result of this gift was his justification. Abraham was saved, or declared "free from guilt or blame," based on a moral account that was now full of righteousness. Crediting is the action that leads to justification, and that means our salvation.

The word "justify" has two meanings, not just one. In addition to "absolve, declare free of blame," it can also mean "to demonstrate or prove to be just, right or valid; to show to be well founded." The first meaning is the cause of our salvation (we are saved because our guilt has been washed away); the second is the effect of our salvation (our saved lives are revealed in right living).

This second definition is what is usually in view when we use the word "justify" in English. "Justify your position," we say. We're asking for evidence; we want proof.

The Bible frequently uses this sense of the word, too. Jesus taught that a person's true nature will be evident in his conduct:

*"The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil. And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned."* (Matthew 12:35-37)

Here, Jesus taught that the man with good treasure in his heart brings forth good fruit, which "justifies" him. This external display demonstrates the quality of the man within. This is not justification in the sense of salvation. Your words don't absolve you (which would be the first definition). Instead, they bear testimony of what's in your heart, your character (the second definition).

So, which definition did James have in mind? Paul clearly referred to salvation. What about James? To discover this, timing is everything.

When Paul makes his case for justification by faith, he referred to the beginning of Abraham's walk with God (Genesis 15):

*"And He took him outside and said, 'Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."*

But the justification that James had in mind came 25 years later in Abraham's life (Genesis 22):  
*"And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'"*

Abraham was not being saved again. He was demonstrating (showing evidence of) the salvation he had received decades earlier. Abraham's faith was no passive, intellectual exercise. He *proved* his faith in God.

James speaks to the man who is all talk and no action. His simple message is that true salvation always proves itself. That's why he asks, *"What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"* The apostle John echoes the same sentiment: *"The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him."*

Paul wrote to Gentile believers in the city of Rome. The critical truth they needed to know, as non-Jews, was that God rewards faith, apart from keeping the Law of Moses.

James, on the other hand, wrote to the scattered Jewish believers. The truth they needed to know, was that true faith is demonstrated by inclusive acts of compassion, not self-righteous isolation.

James and Paul go together. Like two sides of the same coin, they don't conflict with each other; they complement each other.

Both teach us something vital. Paul looks at what goes on internally; James talks about the external results. Paul says, "We're saved by faith." James says, "This is what saving faith looks like."

Faith alone saves, but faith that remains alone is not the genuine article. It's not saving faith.

I invite you to learn more about what saving faith looks like by joining me for a study of the Letter of James on Tuesday nights in the Library. We begin this week!

Here is one point on which Paul and James clearly agree: The Law demands perfection. Therefore, the Law gives us no hope because it has a built-in defeater to any attempt at justification by works.

*"Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law"* (Galatians 5:3).

James agrees. He wrote, *"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all"* (James 2:10).

You've heard of the Ten Commandments. Let me review what they demand of us.

- 1) Have you ever given allegiance to anything else above God in your life?
- 2) Have you ever used any thing as an object of worship or veneration?
- 3) Have you ever used God's name in a vain or vulgar fashion?
- 4) Have you consistently honored God by worshipping Him on a regular basis?
- 5) Have you ever disobeyed or dishonored your parents?
- 6) Have you ever murdered anyone? (Jesus said in Matthew 5:22 that if you're merely angry with a brother, you violate this principle).
- 7) Have you ever had sex with someone other than your spouse? (Jesus said that if you look upon someone and entertain the thought, you're guilty of sin here.)
- 8) Have you ever taken something that was not yours?

9) Have you ever told an untruth about someone else?

10) Have you ever desired to have something that was not yours?

Which of us have not failed in one or more of these areas? And if that is so, none of us can claim salvation, based upon our behavior.

Our only hope is to believe in Jesus Christ the Savior. Our only hope is to rely on what He has done for us—that He died in our place, to pay the penalty for our sins, and that He rose from the dead to prove that His payment was complete.

No change of behavior can bring you to salvation. Yet, salvation will surely show up in changed behavior.

And that's the truth!