

Paul and James: A Contradiction? Case Study: Faith and Works

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Introduction

In our previous study, we considered whether James and Paul agreed about the problem of sin and God's gift of righteousness. This talk has the same goal: do James and Paul agree, this time, on faith and works? Or, is James, as Luther stated, just an epistle of straw? On the question of faith and works, do James and Paul agree or disagree? We proceed here as in our other study: James was written before Paul in point of time.

James on Faith and Works

James' discussion of faith and works connects and follows closely on what he says about righteousness. And while most often we think of verses 14-26 of chapter two, we should begin at James 1:21-27:

Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

First, let's be clear, that like Paul, James sees the power in the word of God. The believer is to receive "the word of God implanted, which is able to save." James would make short work of today's laughing Laodiceans who want to make human experience judge the Bible because allegedly the Bible is only a culturally-conditioned document.

Just for a moment, let's touch this an an aside. To say the Bible is culturally-conditioned is to say that its writers were all embedded in their culture and that their opinions were shaped by their

culture. It is alleged even their views of what truth is and who God is were shaped by their culture. Now, there's some truth to this. Who among us is not in some degree, let's even say in some very, very large degree, embedded in our culture and affected by the ideas and viewpoints of our culture?

But the Holy Spirit is not impacted by culture, and if God is going to communicate to His people through prophets and Bible writers from different cultures across thousands of years, isn't God able to correct for such biases and to keep them out of His Word? Is His word divine truth or is it an unholy blend of human prejudices and opinions and biases and errors? Is the Bible a cacophany of dozens of disagreeing voices and disagreeing theologies, or does the Bible have one Author, singular, God, expressed in the words of a host of inspired Bible writers (plural), all sieved and corrected by the Holy Spirit? Is the Bible a human or a divine text?

If the Holy Spirit did not protect God's word from human bias, then what we have instead of truthful facts about moral matters from the infinite God, is a collection of human opinions and errors by which we are trying to live. Then we are no better off than before we became Christians because what we have is only a book of opinions. Then the Bible is an optional authority and we need to get our heads together. Then we are very dependent on scholars and councils and the words of experts who will interpret the Bible for us. Then, to receive "the word implanted," is just to receive more of the same, more of what we already have, more of the word of man, more words that cannot change us. Then we are essentially without a Bible as we have understood it.

I might point out that those who believe that not only the writers of Scripture but the text of Scripture itself is culturally-conditioned, who are scholars and pastors and administrators among us, will be very disinclined to honestly state such views openly. This is a Bible Church, after all, in which members believe in a six day creation, wash each others feet according to the practice of Jesus, and who believe that the miracles spoken of in Scripture are real.

So you will not usually hear of cultural conditioning, and you cannot depend on hearing other accurate labels ("historically-conditioned" and so on). Just like almost no one will tell you they are using the historical-cultural method. They will use another label, usually one no one uses. So I want you to be sober. Never forget the admonitions and tests of Scripture. For example, Paul's counsels in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 [READ].

Back to James now. He has no doubts about the efficacy and importance of God's word. James urges the believer to "prove yourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves." It is important to start with the word and then do the word. We should do the word immediately.

The very first illustration James uses for faith related to works is a person looking at his own face in a mirror. He looks at himself and goes away and immediately forgets who he is. This is the way it is with us. As soon as we "graduate" (I hope you hear my quote marks here!) from the Bible, we forget who we are. We forget what are God's powerful promises!

The only way to have the word implanted, I hope you saw in the text (James 1:21), was to put aside all wickedness and in humility receive the word. Some are not putting aside wickedness. The theology they believe doesn't demand that. Then they study the word but from that

standpoint that makes human reason judge over the revelation of the Creator of humans. The call rather is to look intently into the perfect law and abide by it. Blessed is that person.

Now, to James 2:14-26. James describes three unsatisfactory situations, then gives two corrective Bible examples. Let's take a look.

First we have verses 14-17:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 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? Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being by itself.

So, unsatisfactory situation one: dead faith. Someone claims that he has faith but he has no evidence for it. Can unsubstantiated faith save him? Is it able? Is it a capable faith? The example: someone has an actual need. They need clothing. They need food. Then from the professed Christian comes the useless, even hypocritical response to go away and be warmed and filled but with the professed Christian having done nothing at all for the person in need.

James asks the same question as at the beginning of the segment: what use is it? His analysis? This is a description of the first case he addresses: dead faith. Dead faith does not meet the need; it's all talk and no action. It is empty words. There is no life in it, no warmth, no nurture. It professes to be faith, but it is self-deception. It claims to be belief in Jesus but it does nothing for the flesh and blood people Jesus died to save.

But then we come to the second unsatisfactory situation in verse 18:

But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'

This second case is an impossibility. James challenges the one who would claim that he has faith to show him his faith without the works. Meanwhile, James says he will show you his faith by his works. The impossibility is showing faith without, we might say, there being anything to show for it. Words alone are insufficient--we saw that in case one). Words can be truth-filled or empty. But works by definition are substantive. They are actions, ripples of belief touching lives by actual facts. Good works must not remain in the theoretical realm; they must be demonstrated.

The third unsatisfactory case is at verse 19:

You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

A key thought in Hebrew belief is found at Deuteronomy 6:4, 5: "Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." God is one. Every believing Jew believes that God is one. The devils used to converse with God face to face. They know there is one God. They don't doubt His existence. They wouldn't be imprisoned on earth but that He had thrown them out! When you've been cast out by someone, you cannot help but be persuaded that they exist.

Not only does God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--exist, but God acts as one. Each of the three

persons of the Godhead is acting in harmony with the others. The third unsatisfactory case is the situation of mental assent, intellectual agreement without corresponding works. The devils believe. They can't help but believe. But their believing does not result in unselfish works on their part. Far from it. Their response to God is toxic resistance.

Mere knowledge doesn't save the devils and mere knowledge will never save you or me. The devils know but they don't love what they know. It displeases them to be subject to God's moral viewpoint. They do not love the truth. They are at odds with the truth. They are not available to be changed by the truth. They're not available to truth.

James would ask you and I to be available to truth. God wants us to seek it. Have you and your spouse ever been driving and you're hungry and you're searching on your phone for a certain kind of food? You want not only healthy food, but healthy Mexican, not only Thai but healthy Thai. You are seeking it. The devils believe but they tremble. They do not love the facts. Their knowledge is actually harmful to them.

And so, we could say that James outlines three unsatisfactory cases:

- dead faith, empty words,
- showing faith without works, an impossibility, and
- agreement without works.

What is the common piece? Case 1: No works; case 2: no works; case 3: no works. Case 1 is an empty hypocritical, faith. Case 2 is even emptier; there are not even any fake words! Case 3 is agreement that calls forth no responding works.

But after these three cases, James offers two concrete examples of working faith. First, Abraham. James asks rhetorically, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" In other words, the actions of Abraham were vindicated. It was right for Abraham to offer Isaac because God told him to do that. James describes what was occurring in 22: "faith was working [sunayrgei] with his works."

This process resulted in his faith being completed/perfected. It is at just this point that James takes us back to Genesis 15:6 and tells us that this is how it was fulfilled to Abraham that, "He believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." In other words, what was true in Genesis 15:6 was true in an even fuller way later in Abraham's life. Which would be a case of James' main initial point:

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 (James 1:2-4).

Abraham's works completed his faith and conversely, Abraham's faith completed his works. This is why we have the "working with" (Synergy) idea going on here. And so, James concludes "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (v. 24). Is the answer here as simple as that James is saying that actual faith is manifest in works? Works in themselves don't save, but neither does a mere verbal claim to have faith. But a person who believes demonstrates the righteousness of God and manifests faith in works. James refuses to separate them.

This goes along in a most interesting way with some of Ellen White's provocative statements

about justification:

There are conditions to our receiving justification and sanctification, and the righteousness of Christ...while good works will not save even one soul, yet it is impossible for even one soul to be saved without good works (Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 111).

And

While God can be just, and yet justify the sinner through the merits of Christ, no man can cover his soul with the garments of Christ's righteousness while practicing known sins or neglecting known duties. God requires the entire surrender of the heart, before justification can take place; and in order for a man to retain justification, there must be continual obedience, through active, living faith that works by love and purifies the soul (Ibid., p. 100).

These thoughts by the author of James and by Ellen White are consistent.

But James offers one more illustration:

In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the breath is dead, so also faith without works is dead (James 2:25-26).

Simply, Rahab demonstrated her faith by helping the Hebrew messengers and misdirecting the authorities who came to arrest them. James is driving the nail in deep: actual faith confirms itself by creating a trail of facts. Rahab acted-out what she believed. She could have said anything. She could have offered whatever explanation she wanted to the Hebrew scouts. What we believe always produces a trail of evidence. Your life is the laboratory. That's why faith must show itself in action.

Paul on Faith and Works

Let's turn now to Romans four. This chapter includes Paul's most extended discussion of the relationship of faith and works, so that is the reason why we'll use it as our chief comparison with James one and two.

Now where does Romans four fit into Paul's rather close reasoning? He offers a rather detailed argument extending across several chapters of Romans. I want to give you a summary. If you are taking notes, I want to suggest you write this out, on paper or on your phone or tablet.

So there is going to be a lot of synthesis and analysis going on here. That makes this step a hard one. It is a step where you, whether you are listening or reading, can easily go wrong because you trust a presenter, preacher, or author who reaches a wrong conclusion when he is summarizing. So write this summary down for now and then if you study this presentation more deeply later, then prove all things and hold fast that which is true.

So here's the summary. Are you ready?

Here are the 13 stages of Paul's argumentation in Romans chapters 1 thru 8 summarized. Then

we'll look more carefully at what he says in chapter four.

Stages in Paul's Romans Salvation Argument

- 1a God's gospel has the power to change all people
- 1b The Gentiles are condemned because they suppress the truth
- 2 The Jews are condemned because they act hypocritically
- 3a All have sinned and are condemned by their choice to oppose God
- 3b Nevertheless, God can be both just and justify the repentant
- 4 The plan of redemption includes everyone, Jew and Gentile. All are saved who receive the promise
- 5a Reconciled by Christ's death, we are saved by His life
- 5b Although all men have chosen to sin, all who chose Jesus will be made righteous; grace is stronger than sin
- 6 Through God's grace His slaves triumph over sin
- 7a We serve now in newness of the Spirit
- 7b The believer is subject to an internal struggle; Jesus sets us free
- 8a Jesus' incarnation showed the way; believers overcome through the Spirit
- 8b We keep advancing through Jesus, knowing God is working out His plan for us

Now, make sure you are open to Romans four, and I'll invite you to visually scan the sections of the text as I describe what is happening in each section.

By the way, there is a very important stage in one's Bible study. My goal is to take a very lengthy, detailed argument, and better understand it. The way I do that is to take a section of text the Bible writer has laid down and I break it into its pericopies. That's just a fancy word for fat paragraphs. Look at the page of your Bible. Many of us have Bibles where the publisher has separated the text out into these sections for us by placing the text into different paragraphs or segments. For example, I have here what many consider to be very most literal translation, the New American Standard Bible. By the way, you want a very literal text as your main study text because the literal translations have the least interpretation intervening between the scholars who make the translation and yourself. As Dr. Reynolds mentioned, translations which are among the most literal are the NASB, the King James Version, the New King James Version and ESV.

In the NASB, verses 1-12 are a pericope, or section, or paragraph. Then verses 13-15 make the next segment. Then verses 16-25. In my own study I felt that really verses 16-22 is a paragraph, and verses 23-25 make a paragraph, so I used those as sections in my own study.

If you have the King James version, as so many of us do, the paragraphing I am speaking of (verses 1-12, 13-15, 16-22, 23-25 and so on) is much harder to detect, because the text has been strung out with the verse numbering which were added after AD 1556. So in KJV it is very easy to find a verse, but for careful study it is more difficult to follow the flow of thought in chunks. That's where the Pilcrow mark comes in. The editorial practice in the earlier years of printing was to mark off paragraphed sections with this funny, backward double-P symbol. So if you have a KJV, see where your pilcrows are placed. I'm betting many of you have them in at least some of the same places I have divided the text. Keep your eye peeled for the pilcrow. He helps you see the paragraphs.

When you know where the paragraphs are, then you can engage in the serious step of reading through those paragraphs again and again and again until you begin to have serious clarity about the writer is saying in that paragraph. I have spent many, many prayerful hours reading through these paragraphs over and over so that I could better understand what Paul is saying and so summarize his argument for us. So here is my present attempt:

Summary of the Argument in Romans Four

Paul makes his argument in Romans four in four parts. Part one (verses 1-12): Abraham believed in God while uncircumcised. Genesis 15:6 is quoted referring to God's promise of innumerable descendents for him even though he is aged and childless. While one who works is due a wage, the faith of one who believes in God is computed to him as righteousness. Abraham believed God while he was uncircumcised and received the sign of circumcision only later. And so, he became the father of all who believe who are circumcised, and, all who are not circumcised, so long as they act out their belief as Abraham did. One who believes takes those steps.

Part two (verses 13-15): the promise to Abraham was not through law but through righteousness by faith. If those who are "of the law," become heirs on the basis of merit for what they do, then God's promise would be nullified.

Part three (verses 16-22): because of the way Heaven has unfolded the plan of redemption, salvation is guaranteed to all the sons of Abraham by faith and not by works. Abraham did not let the empirical facts about his and Sarah's aging bodies control his faith. Both of them being about 100 years old, still he believed God's promise that his descendants would be numerous. He did not waver in unbelief but became stronger in God's word. He believed that what God promises He performs. This was faith. This was computed to him as righteousness.

Part four (verses 23-25): the promise was written for Abraham and for us. As we believe that the Father raised Jesus from the dead, our faith, like Abraham's, is computed to us as righteousness. Jesus died for our transgressions and was raised so that we might be justified, that is, made righteous.

When we compare Paul's argument with James' argument, we recognize that, like James, he is speaking of an active faith, of Abraham and believers trusting in the Father who accepted Jesus' sacrifice and resurrected Him from the dead.

Count Reckon Impute, Credit, Compute

A word is in order here on the word used in your translation for count, reckon, impute, compute. You find this word at 4:3 ("credited"), 4:4 credited, 4:5, credited, 4:6 credits, 4:9 credited, 4:10 credited, 4:11 credited. You'll find the same word later, at 22 and 23. These are all various uses of the word LOGISTHEY. It is the Greek word from whence we get our English word, "logic." Its meaning can very roughly be described as to calculate or determine, to process. to compute or calculate. usually with numbers the Greek word is ARITHMON where we get our English word "Arithmetic," which is used at Revelation 13:18 to "calculate" the number of the beast. But to compare relations between concepts, we speak of that as working with words. The Greek noun for "word" is "logos." Jesus is the "Word." And the Greek verb for comparing or computing

words is "logisthomi"

I just want to say, this verb does not mean to consider things as they are not, but as they truly are. So Abraham's faith, his belief, is considered by God to be righteousness. God accepts it as righteousness for him. And God accepts your faith as righteousness for you. Faith is a gift of course. God gives to each person the measure of faith. But we can nurture it or discard it. Abraham is an example of a person who believes in God, and his actions show what he believes.

Galatians 5:6

Finally, let's look at Galatians 5:4-6:

You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

Our works can never earn us any merit before God. Paul is talking about circumcision and so he says the one trusting in circumcision is turning the knife on himself, cutting himself off, circumcising himself off Christ. It's a crude illustration but Paul is trying to get their attention. Working is falling from grace.

When he says, "we, through the spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness," he does not mean waiting like waiting for your dental appointment. He means waiting in terms of looking for, seeking, engaged in. You who seek to be justified by law, you're on the wrong path. Meanwhile, we, who are living by the Spirit, by faith, are in the process of actually attaining to what you seek through wrong means.

They are in the flesh; Paul is in the Spirit. They are executing cold, faithless actions; Paul is living out his faith in his actions. They have fallen from grace; Paul "through the spirit, by faith" are living the experience.

In Jesus it is not about being circumcised or not being circumcised. Circumcision, after all, has only ever been a symbol or a sign (Romans 4:11). It points or hints to the situation of the inward man. The sign is not the totality or even minor part of the totality. What really matters is faith working through love.

Piling up these three ideas together is important: faith, working, love. Notice that these have to go together. Faith without action to show it is nothing. Action which is carried out without a motivation of love is not of God. God is love. Actions indited by Him will be executed in love. What we all want is a faith that works in love. Why? Because there really is no other kind of faith. A faith that works lovelessly isn't from God. But we'll be surprised sometimes, because God's love-indited faith is going to mean we will respond to His correction, reprovings, and rebukings. If there is nothing in the message that builds me, that corrects me, I have to wonder if I am sitting with my ears listening for smooth things.

Do James and Paul agree on faith and works? You knew before I spoke one word that we would come down to the conclusion of this study and I would say they do. And now, at the conclusion, I

say, they do.

How do we get here?

We have a question: are James and Paul teaching in contradiction to each other?

We want to come to an answer. How? We can seek out the opinions of authors, writers, preachers, commentaries, sets of scholars, councils. And we want to be subject to our brothers and sisters who are like-minded, who are followers of Jesus, who hold the same faith as we do. But dangers abound for us. Because someone is a well-known writer in our Church, does this mean we agree with their opinions? Not necessarily. What we need to do is to study for ourselves. We need to have enough basic equipment to reach conclusions based on our own personal study.

The way we will know whether James and Paul agree or disagree will be to study what they have written for ourselves. Again, what we are doing when we are studying the Bible is we are studying the ideas of the divine Author, capital "A," which that Author presents to us intentionally in the words of His Bible writers. We need to understand sections of the Bible, and then compare those sections with other passages, other sections, having the same Author (capital "A"), and either the same or a different Bible writer. But we begin with assumptions that God revealed truth through the Bible, that God's ideas agree with God's ideas, and that God's inspired writer's agree with God's other inspired writers.

On faith and works, James and Paul agree. Faith without works is dead. We need a faith that works. And if we were studying what Ellen White has to say on this, here is where we might introduce a very powerful set of quotations which will confirm this. But that is not so much our study.

Conclusion

I want to conclude, but one last thought on Scripture plus and Scripture minus. Protestants had to protest and even depart from the Roman Catholic Church because the Roman Catholic belief system is ultimately the Bible PLUS. The Bible + tradition = Roman Catholic belief and practice. And when human traditions get wedged in side-by-side with the Bible the inevitable result is that God's truth gets crowded out. Protestantism is, Sola Scriptura is, because Christianity was corrupted by the mystery of iniquity, the man of sin, the Papacy.

But we need to understand the equally dangerous, or even more dangerous, Bible MINUS plan. That is liberal Protestantism. Liberal Protestantism developed out of Protestantism. The use of higher criticism, historical criticism, and all its pieces arose out of liberal Protestantism. This approach to the Bible means the Bible MINUS. Using human reason the Bible is vivisected and cut into bits and pieces and applying presuppositions and reasoning and conjecture and a host of assumptions, different bits are stripped out as having never been part of the Bible. I'm not talking about what is unfortunately called "lower criticism," which only means determining the best we can what is the reading of the original text. That is a necessary task. But I'm talking about taking that text and then dissecting it. So when you get to a miracle like Jesus walking on the water, that is ruled out a priori. I don't see it in the world today, I can't reproduce it, its not scientific, it must

not have happened. So, now I search for the principle beneath the myth that Jesus walked on water. So I come up with some innocuous lesson of my own after I have stripped the text of supernaturalism. The only problem is, What if Jesus truly did walk on water? Then I have eisogated the text, inserted my idea into the text, overwritten the text of God with the text of man.

But there are many ways to do eisogesis, many ways to overwrite the text with our own meanings. No one is going to come to you and admit that they think the text is culturally-conditioned. Instead, they will come with an approach to interpretation which is clothed in some reasonable sounding name. They'll tell you it is Adventist. And they will proceed to interpret so as to lead you to think of the text as meaning something different than it means. Why? because they themselves are trapped in an ideology, an opinion that they must propagate. They have told themselves a lie and accepted it and now they are going to tell you a lie and they are determined that you will accept it.

We are on guard against the Bible PLUS, but we are not on guard against our own scholars using the Bible MINUS.

In this hour we need to be on guard. When the simple is shrouded in the confusing, you should be hearing alarm bells. James and Paul agree with each other. There are not contradictions. And Ellen White was prescient when she admonished us: "brethren, cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost. The ingenuity of men has been exercised for ages to measure the word of God by their finite minds and limited comprehension. If the Lord, the Author of the living oracles, would throw back the curtain and reveal His wisdom and His glory before them, they would shrink into nothingness and exclaim as did Isaiah, 'I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips'" (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 18).