

Epistle of James does not deny salvation by faith alone

SUMMARY

The epistle of James appears to conflict with Paul's doctrine of justification (justified means to be declared in the right and to be declared sinless - for Catholics and Protestants it means that God has decided to forget your sins) or salvation by faith alone. For this, Luther called it an epistle of straw. It appears to agree with the Catholic doctrine that faith and hope and charity are necessary for entry into God's presence to enjoy everlasting life. Charity is about doing good works for the love of God.

But the conflict is only apparent. James was writing for one kind of person - the person who claims to be saved by faith and does no good works. Paul was writing for another - the person who does good works and does not see that faith alone saves.

James was saying we are saved not by good works but for good works. He answers those who think that faith matters and good works do not. Paul is answering those who think that good works matter and not faith. So Paul and James complement each other.

It has been noticed that Paul writes about justification as in being judged worthy by God of eternal life while James 2 does not mention eternal life. It talks about being profitable - in this world. James is saying that as far as others are concerned, you are no good if you just believe and do no good works.

James' epistle seems to say we are justified by good works not just by faith alone. Yet it quotes with approval and to support that declaration, a verse that says that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. That is a verse teaching salvation by faith only. James said that faith needs to be lived out by good works and works of faith to be any good. By works he means living out the faith and making it real. It is about having real faith. It is not about doing good works to earn God's approval. You are justified by works in the sense that your works are your faith. Far from being a denial of salvation by faith only, James is affirming the doctrine.

The Roman Catholic Church even today refuses to admit that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is in the Bible. It wants to believe that God is duty bound to give it Heaven for doing good works. That is essentially pride. As Luther pointed out, that results in all its monasticism and celibacy and penances becoming insulting to God and virtue.

IN DEPTH STUDY

Read it first.

James 2

14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

New King James Version

Verse 14 refers to faith in the sense that a person claims to have faith but does not. The person does nothing to show he really has faith and trust in God. Verses 15 and 15 make that clear. A person must act like a faithful person if they claim to have faith. As for verse 21, we read that Abraham was made good by offering Isaac. But verse 22 says it is because he showed his faith was real by his works. None of that contradicts the Protestant notion of salvation without good works - the

doctrine that we are saved for doing good and not saved by doing good.

I would propose for your consideration the analysis of James' letter in *By Faith Alone*, RC Sproul, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1995. Read pages 136 – 137. We learn that when James says that we are justified by works and not just by faith he doesn't say he means we are justified before God by works. That would be a contradiction of Paul. Paul declares that Abraham was justified by God before he would do any good works in Romans 4. Paul says that doing good works to be justified is a sin and that faith is the only way. We are justified by works but not before God. That is why James says that Abraham perfected his faith by works and made it real.

The fact that James quotes as true a verse that says that Abraham was justified by faith alone proves that he was not contradicting Paul. James was just trying to say that though justification comes by faith alone it doesn't come by faith that is alone. Faith must result in good works if it is true faith.

Paul is talking about how a person gets justified by faith in the first place for he wrote that obedience could not save you for you can't obey all the time so you have to turn to God in faith and repentance to get saved.

James is on about a person who supposedly has already being justified by faith alone. If that person does no good works and if there is no improvement in that person's life then that person's faith is dead or useless or unreal so he was not justified at all in the first place for there was no genuine reception of Christ and his grace. James said that belief alone without repentance and good deeds is hopeless for even the Devil in Hell believes. He said that this shows that you are justified by works and not by belief alone.

Catholic and Protestants teach that faith justifies. But James when on about Abraham and Rahab having been justified by their works he gives the impression he means works alone are enough. But the context shows what he meant was works that express faith. The works say, "I have faith." So to say they justify is really another way of saying faith alone justifies. Works by themselves are no good. Works are integral to true faith.

The sect, the Church of Christ, says that Paul was writing that works of the Law could not save while James was saying that the works of faith could save (page 5, *Is it Necessary for You to be Baptized to be Saved?*). It also says that the reason the works of the Law were not the same as the works of faith was because the works of the Law were boastful and the works of faith are humble (page 6, *ibid*). But anybody doing boastful works was not keeping the Law at all while Paul made it clear that it was obeying the Law that could not save. The Law commanded humility and bending the knee to God. In Romans he has a go at the righteousness of the Law being no good without saying anything about boasting for a long time. He did condemn boastful works but he never blamed them for the ineffectiveness of the Law. In Romans 4 he said that if Abraham had been saved by good works he would have had grounds for boasting which implies that he would have been right to boast. But Paul believed that boasting was never right so what he meant by boasting was just believing that you were righteous as he admits that Abraham would have had the right to boast. So boasting in his theological vocabulary was not necessarily claiming to be better than you were but being righteous by obedience and knowing it. He used the word boasting different from the way we do. Though this "boasting" was fair and good it was entitled to be called boasting for God hates it and wants us to approach him his way, by the blood of Jesus. If this doesn't make sense don't worry for very little of Paul's theology did anyway. So what we call self-esteem is being roundly censured here. The New Testament did the same in many other books.

Paul said that Abraham believed God's seemingly impossible promises without wavering and this was "credited to him as righteousness or living a good life" (Romans 4:22). It says nothing about Abraham doing anything other than believe. You might say that somebody just believing can mean that their belief is credited to them as righteousness. But you cannot say somebody doing good is credited to them as righteousness because doing good is righteousness. Paul was underlining that Abraham was reckoned righteous for having done nothing but just for having faith. The Roman Catholic Church cannot teach this. It holds that belief is just the start and it is only when you do good works to express your faith that you are justified or made righteous by faith for they say that faith for Paul meant faith and carrying it out.

Paul's system stressed that we could not boast that God saved us because of our good works. This implies that the boast is a terrible thing. If we obeyed to stay saved we could still boast but Paul says there is no room for boasting at all in the scheme of salvation.

Some would add, "In other words, he is saying you are declared and become good by works and not by belief alone. This need not mean the kind of good that earns salvation because you can be saved and declared good by a legal fiction because Jesus obeyed for you and be justified or declared really good for doing good works. Confusion will set in unless you realise that there are two kinds of justification. People think justification means the same kind of justification which causes them to imagine a contradiction between Paul and James."

James cited the example of Abraham from Genesis. He said that Abraham was justified by offering Isaac for this offering

expressed and proved his faith and that this proven faith justified him. He was justified by proven faith. He was indirectly justified by works because his faith could not justify him without them. In other words, he was justified by faith accompanied by good works and not by faith alone that had no good works. James is saying that we are justified by works indirectly and directly justified by faith. All faith alone people believe the same because though faith alone saves you, you will do good if your faith is saving faith.

Look at his words, "You see that a man is justified (pronounced righteous before God) through what he does and not alone through faith" (James 2:24). Belief and good works are necessary for justifying faith but that does not mean that good works justify you in the sense of qualifying you for salvation or do away with the need for a legal fiction. Good works are necessary for justification in the sense that there has been no justification or salvation if they are not present.

The Catholic doctrine that good works earn justification that is needed for salvation is incorrect.

James 2 says that we are saved by works and not by faith alone. But it says that faith means belief that is not accompanied by works like the faith of demons is. That is the kind of faith that is not enough. Faith that desires to do the will of God saves and it suffices and saves even before good works are done for it makes you inclined to be a better person. James declared that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered Isaac BECAUSE this work completed and proved his faith. In other words, the work expressed his faith. The faith produced the work so the work was faith. James says as much when he says that Abraham's faith activated his works and the works were necessary to express his faith and make it real (22) and says that this is what the Bible proves when it says that Abraham believed God and this belief was considered to be righteousness (23). You wouldn't quote a verse from the Bible like that if you believed that faith and good works are necessary for salvation. You would if you believed that the works would be necessary for salvation if they were faith. You can express faith by prayer or by doing good works and it doesn't matter which you use as long as you intend to express that you are accepting Jesus as saviour and Lord who obeyed the Law on your behalf for you. James is saying that works like that save not because they are works but because they are faith. So James does not mean that good works justify in themselves but works that are faith justify simply because faith alone justifies and they are faith.

James 2 is very interesting. It says that if a person never does a single good act but claims that he has faith then that faith will not get him saved or into Heaven. We might think this is hypothetical. This is not true. The thought is speculation. You take a person as not speaking hypothetically unless they indicate that they are. He later writes that if people claim to have faith and do no good works they must be challenged. He wants them talked to this way, "I prove by my good deeds that I have faith. Now prove to me you have faith without any good works to show". James is in agreement with Paul that it is possible to be totally sinful in the eyes of God. Paul and James indicate that we are and thus we cannot do anything to please God so he has to do all the work of saving us. Faith is the indication that he has saved us. That is what salvation by faith alone means.

Ephesians 2 tells the Ephesians that they have been saved by grace through faith and that is not of themselves but is the gift of and not of works but was done so that they would do good works. Catholics believe in justification by faith at the start of your walk with God but after that you have to do good works to stay justified. The Ephesians then were already saved by faith but now when they should be justified by works they are still being told that works have no part in salvation.

One thing is for sure, it is better to justify by faith alone than to justify by faith and good works even when both positions maintain that we are saved by grace alone. Justification by faith alone is a noble doctrine in the sense that it has you doing good because it is good and because you are grateful and not to stay saved which the other theory has you doing. So justification by faith and good works is a contradiction for the result is not justification at all simply because the works only look good and nothing more. And when God forgives the guilty at all why can't he forgive the guilty when they do not repent just because Jesus saved them and obeyed for them? Christians who want the Bible to teach justification by faith and good works are refuting Christianity.

So James did not write that the Old Testament figures did good works and therefore that they were justified by works and not by faith alone. He wrote that their faith was made real by their works and proven sincere. In that sense, good works are necessary.

The Bible denies that good works have anything to do with obtaining salvation. Thus it condemns the Roman Catholic Church for teaching that sacraments and good works are necessary for salvation. That the Bible says nothing to deny that salvation or justification is by faith alone proves that the Catholic Church is opposed to God because it won't take that as proof that the doctrine must be true. The Bible would say if it didn't want to teach that doctrine.

APPENDIX - QUOTE FROM SOMEWHERE

There is no real contradiction - Paul and James were speaking of ...

1. Different Justifications:

James was speaking of an eschatological justification (which is on the basis of works), while Paul was addressing an initial justification which is by grace through faith

2. Different aspects of justification:

Paul was saying that we are not saved by deeds, and James was saying we were saved for deeds.

3. Different problems:

Paul was tackling those who thought that "works of the law" was the way to acceptance with God; and James was addressing those who thought that faith without works could save;

4. Different meanings of faith were being used

Paul was talking about "faith" as trust in Christ, arising from a regenerate heart; James talking about "faith" as mere assent, in a non-regenerate heart.

5. Different "works" being discussed

Paul was denying the need for "works" as ceremonial rites (circumcision, dietary laws, etc); while James was maintaining the need for "works" as moral deeds and especially acts of charity.

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