

Justification by Faith Alone, Chapter 4

The Book of James and Justification by Faith

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In the debate over the doctrine of justification between Roman Catholics and orthodox Protestants, Romanists often appeal to the book of James as proof that works or human merit have a crucial role to play in a person's justification before God. In discussions with dedicated intellectual Papists, the author has noted that the book of James is considered an impregnable fortress that can withstand any Protestant argument. Do the statements on the relationship between faith and works in the book of James support Roman Catholic dogma? Does the book of James contradict the clear teaching on justification by Jesus Christ, Paul and Peter? The truth is that James fully supports the orthodox Protestant understanding regarding justification. Roman Catholics, in their zeal for a religion of human merit, have twisted the epistle of James. A brief consideration of the relevant section in James will demonstrate that James did not contradict Paul. His teaching is in complete harmony with the Protestant doctrine of an *imputed* righteousness. James wrote, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 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? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 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. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works was made perfect? 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. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas. 2:14-26).

The key to understanding James' teaching regarding faith and works is to carefully note the context and general thrust of this section as a whole. If one takes a phrase or verse out of its context, one can make James contradict Paul. Paul says "that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28; cf. 4:5-8; Gal. 2:16; 3:10-13; 5:2-4). James says "that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (Jas. 2:24). Since both Paul and James wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, their teaching on faith and works cannot contradict one another. The solution to such an *apparent* contradiction is not to ignore the teaching of Paul and

declare James a Papist; neither should one declare the book of James an epistle of straw, as Martin Luther did. A careful reading of Paul and James on justification shows that each author was considering justification from a completely different perspective.

In Romans and Galatians the apostle Paul explains *how* men are justified before God. Paul discusses the ground of a person's justification: the sinless life and sacrificial death of Christ, and how Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed or credited to a believer. When Paul discusses faith in this context, he describes faith as an instrument which lays hold of what Christ has accomplished. Paul is explaining salvation by grace through faith. James does not concern himself with the ground of justification, but with easy-believism, or antinomianism. He answers the question, "How does a person know if his faith is genuine or real?" Buchanan writes, "The two Apostles were combating two opposite errors, and sought to check two opposite tendencies. Paul contended against Legalism, and the self-righteous tendency which leads men 'to go about to establish their own righteousness' [Rom. 10:3], and to seek Justification by the works of the Law. James contends against Libertinism, or the Antinomian tendency which leads men to pervert the Gospel itself, and to 'turn the grace of God into licentiousness' [Jude 4]."¹

James is showing the church that the existence of true faith is demonstrated by a person's outward behavior or works. The contrast he discusses is between a true living faith and a false, merely historical, dead faith. "The distinction is manifestly between *theoretic belief* unaccompanied by the practice of good works and a *vital faith* abounding in good works. Faith is the inward, works the outward. Works are the outward sign and pledge, the demonstration of faith within. The man dramatically introduced in the text has faith (v. 19), but his faith is theoretic belief."² It is a mere intellectual assent to certain propositions without trust. A man says that he believes something to be true but never acts upon it. He says he believes in Christ yet does not obey His commandments; he never lifts a finger in service to God's people. Thus, for James the issue is *not* "faith plus works equals salvation," but rather that faith without works is not even a real faith at all, but a mere hypocritical profession. It is dead, a corpse, or non-existent. Men are saved solely through faith in Christ; but that faith must be a genuine faith; a faith that expresses itself outwardly in works of the Spirit. "There is no inconsistency here with the doctrine of justification by grace, for this, as Cranfield observes, is 'but a salutary reminder that the absence of compassions for one's fellow men is conclusive proof that one's professed faith is counterfeit, while mercy shown—though certainly not to be thought of as a meritorious work putting God under an obligation—may be an evidence of a genuine faith.'"³ Thomas Manton writes,

The orthodox, though they differ somewhat in words and phrases, yet they agree in the same common sense, in reconciling James and Paul. Thus, which some say Paul disputeth how we are justified, and James how we shall evidence ourselves to be justified; the one taketh justification for acquittance from sin, the other for acquittance from hypocrisy; the one for the imputation of

¹ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1867] 1977), p. 249.

² J. P. Lange and J. J. Van Oosterzee, *The Epistle General of James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), p. 82.

³ James B. Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 288.

righteousness, the other for the declaration of righteousness. Or as others, Paul speaketh of the office of faith, James the quality of faith; Paul pleaded for saving faith, James pleadeth against naked assent; the one speaketh of the justifying of the person, the other of the faith, &c.⁴

There are a number of indicators within this section of James which support the classical Protestant interpretation. First, the opening sentence introducing the theme of this whole section indicates clearly that the topic under discussion is how to identify true faith. For the sake of argument James pictures an imaginary individual who is totally devoid of good works; who will not even lend a hand to naked, starving, destitute Christians but who *says* he has faith. This person has a heart of stone and has nothing to do with merciful deeds of charity, yet *claims* to have faith. This hypothetical solution raises the question that is answered in the rest of the chapter: “Can faith save him?” To paraphrase, “Can that type of faith save him—a profession entirely devoid of works?” or “Can a faith like this save him?” This is the second question of v. 14. Rhetorically framed, it implies that the faith of v. 14a is useless for salvation. “James is not saying that faith (alone) cannot save (see 1:21; 2:24). The *pistis* [faith] of 14b refers to the ‘worthless’ faith of 14a....”⁵ James from the start of his discussion emphasizes that he is rebuking a *claim* to faith, a *profession* of faith but not a real saving faith. The person that James has in mind is not a self-conscious hypocrite or a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but an outward professor who is living in self-deception. He considers himself a Christian and intellectually assents to the general teaching of Scripture, but by his outward behavior shows that he doesn’t have saving faith. If one proceeds on the false assumption that James is criticizing true saving faith, then the passage not only blatantly contradicts the teaching of Christ and Paul, but also is self-contradictory, for a faith cannot be genuine and dead and worthless at the same time. Works do not and cannot transform a dead faith into a living faith. But they can *demonstrate* the existence of a genuine faith. The Roman Catholic *Jerome Biblical Commentary* concurs: “What was true in the case of Abraham is true universally *by works and faith alone*: As is clear from the context, this does not mean that genuine faith is insufficient for justification, but that faith unaccompanied by works is not genuine. There is thus no basic disagreement of James with Paul, for whom faith ‘works through love’ (Gal. 5:6).”⁶

Second, the false, non-saving type of faith is described as the same faith possessed by demons. “You believe that there is one God; you do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (v. 19). The demons know and accept the fact that there is one God, but they do not trust in God for salvation. Their belief does not lead to commitment and obedience, but only fear. Likewise, many people have an intellectual understanding of the gospel, but they do not really trust in Christ. Calvin writes, “from this one sentence it appears evident that the whole dispute is not about faith, but of the common knowledge of God, which can no more connect man with God, than the sight of the sun carry him up to heaven; but it is certain that by faith we come nigh

⁴ Thomas Manton, *Commentary on James* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1693] 1962), p. 264.

⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *James* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 81.

⁶ Thomas W. Leahy, “The Epistle of James,” in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall), 2:373.

to God. Besides, it would be ridiculous were anyone to say that the devils have [real] faith; and James prefers them in this respect to hypocrites.”⁷ Thomas Manton writes, “Bare assent to the articles of religion doth not infer true faith.... Well, then do not mistake a naked illumination, or some general acknowledgement of the articles of religion for faith. A man may be right in opinion and judgment, but of vile affections; and a carnal Christian is in as great danger as a pagan, or idolater, or heretic; for though his judgment be sound, yet his manners are heterodox and heretical. True believing is not an act of the understanding only, but a work of ‘all the heart’ Acts viii. 37.”⁸

Third, James says that good works prove the reality of genuine faith. “Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (v. 18). How does a professing Christian give empirical evidence that he has real faith and is not a hypocrite? By his life, by the good works that he performs. Although it is true that the Bible teaches that good works do not contribute one iota to a Christian’s salvation, it also teaches that good works *always* accompany salvation. “James refuses to accept a division between faith and works. True faith cannot exist separately from works, and works acceptable in the sight of God cannot be performed without true faith.”⁹ The Bible teaches that a person who is regenerated by the Holy Spirit and united with Christ in His death and resurrection will produce good works. In other words, justification always leads to sanctification. “It is of utmost importance that while, on the one hand, *justification* and *sanctification* must be distinguished the one from the other, on the other hand the one must never be separated from the other.”¹⁰ If justification and sanctification are confounded, then one has fallen into the trap of legalism or salvation by faith and human merit. If justification and sanctification are separated one from another, then one has succumbed to libertinism or antinomianism. A person is saved solely by the merits of Jesus Christ; but, when a person is saved he is also sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Biblical Protestants have never affirmed that people can be saved by giving an intellectual assent to the gospel while refusing to repent of one’s sins. Repentance is non-meritorious but it always accompanies saving faith. Bible-believing Protestants look to good works done in Christ’s name as evidence that a person is truly saved. This is the teaching of James, that true faith shows itself in works. Remember, James is not expounding the *ground* on which believers are justified, but is considering the *demonstration* of true faith. Combating the same error that James did, Tertullian wrote,

Some persons imagine that they have God if they receive Him in their heart and mind and do little for Him in act; and that therefore they may commit sin, without doing violence to faith and fear; or in other works that they may commit adulteries, and yet be chaste, and may poison their parents, and yet be pious! At the same rate they who commit sin and yet are godly, may also be

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 22:312-313.

⁸ Thomas Manton, *James* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1693] 1962), p. 240.

⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), p. 91.

¹⁰ J. P. Lange and J. J. Van Oosterzee, *The Epistle General of James*, p. 88.

cast into hell and yet be pardoned! But such minds as these are offshoots from the root of hypocrisy and sworn friends of the evil one.¹¹

The teaching of James that genuine faith always leads to good works or that the sincerity of one's faith in Christ can be observed in a person's deeds is a common teaching in the New Testament. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:16-21). Paul wrote, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?... What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!... But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life" (Rom. 6:1, 2, 15, 22). "There is now no condemnation to those who are in Jesus Christ, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.... For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For as many as are led by the spirit of God, these are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:1, 13-14). "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-25). Peter wrote: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:6-7). John wrote: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.... He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 Jn. 1:6-7; 2:4-6). Many more passages could be quoted. The point has been established that the teaching of James is not unique. Faith without works is a mere assertion. A faith without works is fruitless, worthless and dead.

Fourth, that the entire periscope revolves around the question of a genuine faith versus a spurious faith and not works as an additional element necessary for justification is proven by James' repeated statement "that faith without works is dead" (2:17, 20, 26). If James was teaching that works must be added to faith for justification, then he could not logically say that faith without works is dead. Does dead faith (or nonexistent faith) plus works equal salvation? The type of faith that James repeatedly condemns is not Christian faith at all, but is only lip service. "What we have in this comparison is not a contrast of faith over against works. The

¹¹ Ibid, p. 89.

point is that faith *by itself* is dead, much the same as the body without the spirit is dead. The readers of the epistle know that they ought not to touch a dead body but to avoid it whenever possible. By implication they need to avoid faith that is dead because it is like a corpse.”¹² Good works do not make an insincere faith sincere. Works do not make a hypocritical profession genuine. If James was discussing what is needed in addition to *genuine faith* for a person to be saved, then Romanists could claim this passage as a proof text. But obviously he does not. Thomas Manton writes, “*So faith without works*.—The Papists understand true justifying faith, for they suppose it may be without works; but dead faith cannot be true faith, as a carcass is not a true man, and a true faith cannot be without works, Gal. v. 6. We must understand then, an external profession of belief, which, because of some resemblance with what is true, is called faith. *Is dead*; that is, false or useless to all ends and purposes of faith.”¹³ “He does not deny that faith saves, claiming that it is not sufficient and must be complemented by works. The faith which he contests is *dead* faith, and of such he asks, Can *that* faith save him?”¹⁴

Having considered the teaching of this section of Scripture as a whole and having noted the *purpose* of this pericope, we then can understand the statement that Abraham was justified by works (v. 21). James does not speak of justification in the same sense as Paul: as the acquittal or declaration that takes place in the heavenly court the moment a person believes in Christ, but of the justification of Abraham’s faith. James refers to Genesis 22:1, in which we are told that God tested Abraham. What was the purpose of this test? The test was devised to demonstrate the sincerity of the saving faith that Abraham already had. “[W]hen he offered Isaac, his faith was justified to be true and right, for that command was for the trial of it; therefore upon his obedience God did two things—renewed the promise of Christ to him, Gen. xxii.16, 17, and gave him a testimony and declaration of his sincerity, ver. 12 ‘Now I know that thou fearest God,’ saith Christ to him, who is there called the ‘Angel of the Lord.’”¹⁵ A. R. Fausset concurs: “The offering of Isaac (v. 21) formed no *ground* of his justification; for *he was justified previously* on his simple *believing* in the promise of spiritual heirs, numerous as the stars (Gen. xv. 6). That justification was *showed* by his offering Isaac forty years after. That work of faith *demonstrated*, but did not contribute to his justification. The true *shows* its life by fruits, but was alive before either fruits or leaves appeared.”¹⁶

This interpretation is supported by the two verses that follow (vs. 22, 23). James says that “by works faith is made perfect” (v. 22). This statement does *not* mean that works “perfect” a defective faith, for a defective faith cannot save. Neither does it mean that works perfect a weak and feeble faith, for Christ said that the feeblest of faiths can move mountains (cf. Mt. 17:20). “The meaning is not that works supply anything defective in the grace of faith itself, but that they

¹² Kistemaker, *James and John*, p. 101.

¹³ Thomas Manton, *James*, p. 269-270.

¹⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 137.

¹⁵ Thomas Manton, *James*, p. 245.

¹⁶ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, David Brown, *Commentary Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3:588.

reveal it in its fulness of wealth and beauty, as by the leaves and fruit a tree is made perfect.”¹⁷ Matthew Poole writes, “Faith is made perfect by works declaratively, inasmuch as works evidence and manifest the perfection and strength of faith. Faith is the cause, and works are the effects; but the cause is not perfected by the effect, only its perfection is demonstrated by it, as good fruit doth not make a tree good, but show that it is so. See II Cor. xii. 9.”¹⁸

In verse 23 James says that Abraham’s obedience fulfilled Genesis 15:6. This means that Abraham’s act of obedience confirmed the fact that his faith was genuine. His saving faith was objectively manifested by his work. In Genesis 15:4-5 Abraham is promised an heir that will come from his own body and is promised descendants as numerous as the stars. In verse 6 it says, “And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” How did Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac fulfill or confirm verse 6? In Genesis 15:4-5 Abraham is given a promise by Jehovah. In Genesis 22:2 that same promise is put to the supreme test. Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his one and only son. Hebrews 11:19 says that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only son because he believed that God was able to raise him from the dead. The faith that Abraham had for a period of forty years was most clearly manifested by his offering up Isaac. “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called’” (Heb. 11:17-18). “By that action he declared he had a true justifying faith, and therefore the Lord saith after this trial, ‘Now I know that thou fearest me,’ Gen. xxii. 12.”¹⁹ “‘Now I know;’ cf. 18:21, where likewise the mention of God knowing is used more in the sense of confirming his knowledge.”²⁰ Berkouwer writes, “The statement of Genesis 15:6 is seen as fulfilled, completed, incarnated in the concrete reality of Abraham’s obedience of Genesis 22. This appears as well when James writes that Abraham’s faith is perfected in his works. James obviously does not mean to say that Abraham’s faith was at first imperfect, incomplete, and then, gradually, was perfected in concrete existence. In the command given to Abraham lies the touchstone of his faith, and in his obedience Abraham’s faith was revealed as real in the reality of life. ‘If when the test came, the faith had not been matched by works, then it would have been proved to be an incomplete faith. The works showed that the faith had always been of the right kind and so “completed it.”’ This is what James wants to say in his entire discourse on the

¹⁷ Robert Johnson, *James*, p. 201.

¹⁸ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1685] 1963), 3:887. Some commentators say that faith produces good works, which also in turn stimulates faith. By this they do not mean that works add anything of their own to faith but by that faith in action (like a muscle that exercises) maintains its own natural vigor. Stier writes, “James by no means affirms that works give life to, produce or create faith; for faith comes by the power of the word [applied to the Holy Spirit], entering into and received by us and nothing else. But faith grows complete in works, that is the same as Paul’s saying or rather the Lord’s saying to Paul, that the strength of God may be completed in weakness (2 Cor. xii. 9). The strength of faith, indwelling from the beginning and already received along with the first seizing of grace, becomes fully proved, verified, and its operation completed. Thus our calling and election are made sure in the diligence of living and doing (2 Pet. i. 10). Thus Abraham’s first call was made sure in his last works and the word concerning justification by (out of) faith already before accorded to him, was lawfully and actually confirmed as a truth” (Rudolph Stier, *The Epistle of St. James* [Klock & Klock: Minneapolis, MN, (1871) 1982], pp. 356-357).

¹⁹ Thomas Manton, *James*, p. 256.

²⁰ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 2:110.

relation between faith and works. And if he is thus understood it is hard to see how anyone can seriously put a cleavage between him and Paul.”²¹

A brief examination of James’ perspective on faith and works has shown that James and Paul are in complete harmony. They both teach that faith in Christ alone justifies, but they also teach that a genuine, sincere, real, saving faith is never alone. It is always accompanied by good works. Not good works done to achieve salvation, but works that naturally flow from a regenerated heart. Those who are justified love Jesus Christ and love the brethren. They live to serve the Lord and His people. Martin Luther understood the nature of saving faith. He wrote: “Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them. He who does not these works is a faithless man. He gropes and looks about after faith and good works, and knows neither what faith is nor what good works are, though he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.”²²

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²¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, p. 136. Berkouwer quotes J. H. Ropes, *The Epistle of St. James* (1916), p. 220.

²² Martin Luther, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), p. xvii.