

119

MINISTRIES

“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”

Faith and Works: Do James and Paul Disagree on Justification?

The gospel is the good news that God saved us through the Messiah’s death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s righteous standards. Consequently, we deserve eternal punishment; we deserve death.

However, because God loves us, he has made a way for us to be saved from the death that we deserve. By faith, we can be spared eternal punishment. As Paul wrote to the believers in Rome:

Romans 3:23-26

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua], whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus [Yeshua].

According to Paul, by God’s grace we have been justified. To be “justified” is a legal concept which, in this context, means to be acquitted—that is, to be declared righteous in God’s courtroom (BDAG 4th ed., “δικαιόω,” 220-221). Receiving this favorable verdict is how we are saved from the punishment we deserve for our sins. All have sinned, but as Paul explains, the righteous Messiah *took upon himself* the punishment for our sins when he died on the cross. Despite the fact that our works have failed to live up to God’s righteous standards, we are justified—declared righteous—because of the Messiah’s work. Our righteous standing before God is a “gift” that is “received by faith.”

A couple of verses later, Paul emphasizes this very point:

Romans 3:27-28

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that **one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

As we see, Paul clearly states that we are justified by faith. But this raises some questions when we

consider what James says about how we are justified:

James 2:14

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James 2:21

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

James 2:24

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

So, Paul states that a person is justified by faith, while James contends that a person is justified by works and *not* by faith alone. This appears to be a significant contradiction between these two writers! In fact, this apparent contradiction was one of the main reasons Martin Luther doubted the authenticity of James's epistle. Luther writes:

In the first place [James] is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works...This fault, therefore, proves that this epistle is not the work of any apostle.

—Martin Luther, *Prefaces to the New Testament: Translated by Charles M. Jacobs* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 2010), 44-45

Is Luther right that the epistle of James is “flatly against” Paul? Do Paul and James really disagree on Justification? While many have concluded that they do, a closer look at the relevant passages from Paul and James reveals that their teachings are not contradictory but complementary.

The key to resolving this tension is to recognize that while both authors use the same words, those words can carry different connotations. As C. Ryan Jenkins explains:

It is important to recognize that words are not invariable or wooden constants, but are capable of semantic ranges that depend on contextual, lexical, and other grammatical features by which one may ascertain precision in meaning.

—C. Ryan Jenkins, “Faith and Works in Paul and James,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (January-March 2002), 65.

So, words in the Bible often have different connotations or shades of meaning. We see this in English too. For instance, consider the word *argument*.

You could use this word to say: “The man had a heated *argument* with his friend about theology.”

But you could also use this word to say: “The theologian presented a persuasive *argument* for his view.”

In the first example, the word *argument* describes a confrontational exchange of theological perspectives. But in the second example, the word *argument* represents a set of reasons given in support of a theological position. While the word is the same, two distinct senses are being conveyed in the two examples. The same thing happens in biblical Greek.

In light of this fact of language, it is worth taking a closer look at two key terms used by both James and Paul to see if they are using those terms in the same way.

A Closer Look at “Faith”

When the word “faith” (πίστις) appears in the New Testament, it is not always used in the same sense. Sometimes “faith” is used in a very narrow sense to mean mentally agreeing with an idea. For instance, a person can have faith that “God is one.” That is to say, a person with this type of faith *mentally agrees* with the claim “God is one.” James mentions this type of faith in James 2:19.

James 2:19

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

It should be noted that the Greek verb πιστεύω (pisteuō), which is translated as “believe,” corresponds to the noun πίστις (pístis) which is translated as “faith.” So, apparently, even demons are capable of a narrow type of faith—namely, they can mentally agree with certain biblical truths.

However, “faith” can also be used to mean something much more significant than mental agreement. It has a fuller definition, which means not only mentally agreeing with the truth but also *acting upon* the truth.

In his epistle, James contrasts the narrow sense of faith with the fuller sense of faith. James refers to faith in the narrow sense as being “dead,” “useless,” and equivalent in value to the beliefs held by demons (James 2:14-26). He considers the mere mental agreement with certain truths an incomplete type of faith. He wants his readers to not be content with faith in the narrow sense and instead embrace faith in the fuller sense. Faith in the fuller sense results in works. For James, *that* is the only type of faith that justifies. As C. Ryan Jenkins explains:

The difference between the two uses may be expressed as the difference between a mere *profession* of faith and a dynamic *possession* of faith.

—C. Ryan Jenkins, “Faith and Works in Paul and James,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (January-March 2002), 65.

This distinction between faith that justifies and faith that is incomplete is one piece of the puzzle needed to resolve the tension between James and Paul. When Paul says that one is justified by faith, he does not mean that one is justified by the *incomplete* type of faith that James condemns. Rather, Paul means that one is justified by the type of faith that naturally results in works. How do we know? Because Paul makes it clear what he means by faith throughout Romans. For instance, just two verses after Paul states that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law, he immediately qualifies his statement so that he would not be misunderstood as saying the law is irrelevant to believers. He says that those who are justified by faith will not overthrow the law but rather uphold it:

Romans 3:31

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Moreover, Paul begins and ends his letter to the Romans by stating that his mission is to bring about the “obedience of faith” among the nations (Romans 1:5; 16:26). The most natural way to understand this phrase is that it means “the obedience that faith produces.” Throughout Romans, Paul makes it clear that

faith and obedience go together. As Craig Keener writes:

What does Paul mean by “obedience of faith”? The Greek phrase could be understood in several ways, but Paul is concerned that believers obey God rather than sin (6:12, 16-17; cf. 5:19), and elsewhere speaks of their obedience (16:19) and his mission to bring Gentiles to obedience (15:18). Paul also emphasizes “faith” often in Romans (some forty times, plus twenty-one uses of the cognate verb). He is clear from the beginning that genuine faith in Christ (itself obedience to the gospel; cf. 6:17) should, if carried out, produce a righteous lifestyle (see ch. 6).

—Craig Keener, *Romans*, NCCS (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 21

Additionally, Paul writes that the law is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12), the law is spiritual (Romans 7:14), and that he delights in the law (Romans 7:22). He also says that the Holy Spirit enables believers to fulfill the law’s righteous requirements (Romans 8:4). At the same time, *the carnal mind* opposes the law and does not submit to it (Romans 8:7). It is impossible to reasonably conclude from these statements that Paul thinks believers should abandon the law! Again, although Paul believes that one is justified by faith, he insists that the law continues to be relevant and applicable to our lives as believers. Faith does not overthrow the law but establishes it (Romans 3:31).

If we venture outside of Romans and examine Paul’s other letters, we see that Paul is consistent and that the faith he promotes results in works. In Titus 2:14, he teaches that Yeshua’s sacrifice redeemed believers from lawlessness and resulted in those redeemed believers becoming “zealous for good works.” Also, look at what Paul says in Titus 3:8:

Titus 3:8

The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed [πιστεύω] in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

Here, Paul expects “those who have believed [πιστεύω] in God”—that is, those who have put their faith in God—to “devote themselves to good works.”

So, when Paul uses the term “faith,” it seems he does not disagree with James regarding the type of faith believers should possess. Like James, Paul teaches that one is justified by the type of faith that produces works.

However, even though Paul affirms that one is justified by the type of faith that produces works, there does still appear to be a contradiction. Paul explicitly states that one is justified *by faith* (albeit faith that will produce works), while James explicitly states that one is justified *by works* and not by faith alone (James 2:24). This perceived discrepancy prompts us to take a closer look at another key term.

A Closer Look at “Justified”

Like the term “faith,” the term “justified” (δικαιόω *dikaioō*) can also carry different connotations. As mentioned earlier, Paul uses the term to say that one is acquitted or declared by God to be righteous. That is one sense of the Greek word δικαιόω, translated as “justified.” We might refer to this use of the term as the *declarative* sense. And indeed, if James uses the word “justified” in this declarative sense in James 2:24, it would seem indisputable that he contradicts Paul when he says one is justified by works and not by faith alone.

However, there is another sense of the word “justified” besides the declarative sense. The term δικαιόω can also mean to “vindicate” or “prove to be right” (BDAG 4th ed., “δικαιόω,” 221). We might refer to this sense of the term as the *demonstrative* sense. Paul uses the word in this demonstrative sense when he quotes Psalm 51:4 at the beginning of Romans 3:

Romans 3:3-4

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be **justified** [δικαιόω] in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”

Here, Paul uses the term “justified” to say that God may be *proved to be right* in his words. We see another example of “justified” being used in this demonstrative sense in Matthew 11:

Matthew 11:19

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is **justified** [δικαιόω] by her deeds.

Here, Yeshua counters the criticisms of his contemporaries with a proverb: wisdom is justified by her deeds. That is, wisdom is *proved to be right* by the works she produces. Yeshua is making the point that his ministry will be vindicated or validated by his works.

Notice the similarities between Yeshua’s statement and that of James:

Matthew 11:19

...wisdom is justified [δικαιόω] by her deeds [ἔργων]...

James 2:24

...a person is justified [δικαιόω] by works [ἔργων]...

So, it seems that when James states that a person is justified by works in James 2:24, he is not saying that God acquits or declares a sinner to be righteous on the basis of that person’s works.

No, he is using the term “justified” in the demonstrative sense. He is saying that a person is *proved to be righteous* by his works. Works are the confirmation that a person’s faith is genuine. Real faith will produce a righteous lifestyle. Again, Paul teaches the same thing:

Romans 3:31

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

The overall context justifies (apologies for the pun) the notion that James uses the term “justified” in the demonstrative sense. James was addressing a situation in which certain believers claimed to have “faith,” but because their “faith” was not demonstrated by good works, it was incomplete or “dead” (James 2:14-17). James goes on to say that one’s faith is seen by one’s works:

James 2:18

But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and **I will show you my faith by my works.**

James then reiterates his point that mere mental agreement with biblical truths is insufficient by saying that even demons mentally agree with certain biblical truths (James 2:19). He then contrasts this dead and useless faith with what he considers genuine faith. He gives the examples of Abraham and Rahab, both of whom demonstrated the genuineness of their faith by their actions (James 2:20-26). It is in this context that James states that a person is justified by their works (James 2:24). Given the context, the most natural interpretation of the term “justified” in James 2:24 is “vindicated” or “proved to be righteous.”

In light of what we’ve discovered about the different connotations of the words “faith” and “justified,” we would offer the following paraphrases of the two verses we discussed:

Romans 3:28 (paraphrase)

For we hold that one is justified by faith (declared to be righteous by faith) apart from works of the law.

James 2:24 (paraphrase)

You see that a person is justified (proved to be righteous) by works and not by faith (mere mental belief) alone.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the apparent contradiction between the teachings of James and Paul on justification can be resolved when we carefully consider the nuances of the words “faith” and “justified.” Paul emphasizes that one is justified—that is, acquitted or declared righteous—by faith apart from works. However, Paul means “faith” in the same way James describes *complete* faith—that is, as the type of faith that naturally results in works. James emphasizes that one is justified by works and not faith alone. However, James means “justified” in a demonstrative sense, meaning that one’s works prove the genuineness of one’s faith. Both writers agree that genuine faith results in righteous living, and works are the evidence of a faith that justifies. Therefore, instead of contradicting each other, Paul and James provide complementary perspectives on the relationship between faith and works.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

TWITTER: [www.twitter.com/119Ministries#](https://twitter.com/119Ministries#)