

Faith, Works, and Justification: A Clearer Understanding in James and Paul

James 2 has long been a debated passage in Christian theology, particularly because it seems to contradict Paul's teachings on faith and works. While Paul emphasizes that we are justified by faith alone and not by works, James shows how true faith leads to action, stating that "*faith without works is dead*" (James 2:26). Understanding how these perspectives complement each other deepens our grasp of the gospel message, illustrating that faith transforms lives and produces visible fruit.

Paul: Justification Apart from Works

Paul's writings, especially in Romans and Galatians, focus on the idea that no one is justified by works of the law, referring to Jewish customs such as circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and dietary regulations. These rituals once defined the people of God under the old covenant, but with the coming of Christ, a new way was established—justification by faith in and of Jesus alone. In Romans 3:28, Paul writes, "*For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.*" The customs that once set the Jewish people apart are no longer the basis for justification.

Paul is clear that salvation is not achieved through adherence to these old covenant laws but through faith in and of Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law. The markers of the Jewish law no longer define the people of God; instead, it is faith in the resurrected Christ that brings justification. This shift highlights that justification by faith is not merely intellectual belief but is grounded in trust in God's promise of salvation through Jesus.

James: Faith That Produces Action and Letting Go of the Old System

James builds on Paul's teaching by emphasizing that true justification by faith is demonstrated through action. He is not advocating a return to the Jewish law, but rather works that show the rejection of the righteousness based on the law, counting it as worthless. In James 2:17, he states, "*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*" This is similar to the situation where Peter acted hypocritically by adhering to Jewish customs, for which Paul corrected him in his letter to the Galatians. Peter had faith but no works, distancing him from the gentile believers.

This means that if someone truly believes they are justified by faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ, their actions will reflect this belief by letting go of the old identity markers—such as circumcision and Jewish customs. The new marker of identity for believers is faith in Christ alone. The works that accompany this faith demonstrate that the individual has fully embraced their new identity in Christ, no longer relying on the old system.

Paul expresses a similar idea in Philippians 3, where he says, "*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ*" (Philippians 3:7). Paul had once placed his confidence in his birthright as a Jew and in following the law, but now he considers all of this as "*rubbish*" compared to knowing Christ. This is a perfect example of the works of faith in action. Paul's belief in Christ led him to let go of the old markers that once gave him identity and confidence.

For any believer who has faith in Christ, their actions will demonstrate that they have moved beyond the old system. Their identity is no longer rooted in external practices like circumcision or dietary laws, but in the new creation they have become in Christ. By letting go of these old systems, they show their complete trust in God's promise of life through Jesus. This is the essence of James' message: true faith will always result in actions that reflect a life transformed by Christ. In this context for the Jews the letter is addressed to, walking away from the old identity is as challenging and seemingly absurd as sacrificing the child through whom God promised blessings would come.

The Love of Money and Favoritism in James: A Call to Abandon the Old System

Another issue that James addresses is the favoritism shown toward the rich, a reflection of the old Jewish mindset that associated financial prosperity with God's approval. This belief was rooted in Jewish tradition, particularly in passages like Deuteronomy 28, where material blessing was seen as a sign of God's favor for obedience to the law. Under this mindset, wealth indicated divine approval, and poverty was often seen as a sign of disfavour.

This thinking is evident when Peter, upon hearing Jesus tell the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give to the poor, exclaimed, "*Who then can be saved?*" (Mark 10:26). Even among Jesus' disciples, there was a deep-seated belief that financial prosperity was a sign of righteousness and divine approval. If the rich, who were thought to have God's blessing, couldn't be saved, Peter wondered, who could?

This mindset lingered in the early church, and James directly addresses it in James 2:1-4. He writes:

"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:1-4, NIV).

Their favoritism toward the rich wasn't just about wealth but stemmed from their attachment to the old Jewish system, where financial prosperity was seen as a marker of divine blessing. By favoring the rich, they were clinging to the belief that those with wealth had God's approval. This was the same mindset that Peter reflected when he questioned how the rich could be saved.

James calls them to abandon this way of thinking. He reminds them that under the new covenant, God does not show favoritism based on wealth. In fact, James 2:5 says:

"Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him?"

James is encouraging believers to move away from their old mindset, where financial success was seen as a sign of God's favor. They were still measuring people's value and spiritual closeness by their material wealth rather than their faith in Christ. Showing favoritism toward the rich revealed their attachment to the old standards of the law, instead of embracing the new covenant, where faith—not wealth—is the true sign of God's blessing. Although they professed faith in Jesus, they began to neglect the works that naturally flow from the faith of Christ. It was as if they were returning to living "in" Moses rather than being "in" Christ.

Abraham's Faith: Sacrificing the Old Identity

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac powerfully demonstrates his faith—not because his identity was tied to the physical promise of his son, but because he refused to shift his faith from God to Isaac. Even after Isaac, the miracle child, was born, Abraham's faith remained in God's ability to fulfill His promises, not in the son who represented that

promise. When asked to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's actions showed that his trust was still in God alone. He believed that God could fulfill His promise even if Isaac was sacrificed, trusting that God could even raise him from the dead if necessary (Hebrews 11:19).

In Genesis 22, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac revealed that his trust was not in the firstfruit of the promise but in God alone. He believed in God, not in Isaac. Abraham showed that his faith was not dependent on Isaac, the symbol of the promise, but in God's power to fulfill His word. Similarly, Paul emphasizes that we are justified by faith, not by works like circumcision or other Jewish customs. Our justification, as Paul explains, is rooted in faith in God's promise, not in external rituals.

James builds on this by explaining that Abraham's faith was not only credited to him as righteousness but was fulfilled through his actions. James 2:23 states, *"And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend."* This fulfillment shows that Abraham's faith reached its full expression when his actions demonstrated his trust in God. It wasn't just theoretical belief—it was faith lived out through real, sacrificial obedience.

Thus, Abraham's life illustrates that true faith leads to actions that let go of old identity markers. Just as Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, trusting fully in God's faithfulness, believers too must rely completely on God's promises. A life of faith is not defined by external works or systems but by trust in God alone.

Conclusion: The Harmony of Faith and Works in a Life Transformed by Christ

James and Paul do not contradict each other but rather affirm the same truth from different angles. Just as Paul taught in Romans, justification by faith means leaving behind the old markers of identity, such as circumcision or adherence to the law. James' emphasis is that if you truly believe you are justified by Christ, your actions will reflect this belief. Your works will show that you no longer rely on the old system, but instead trust in Christ alone.

In essence, James highlights that true faith naturally produces works that reveal a life transformed by God, just as Paul affirmed. Both teach that justification by faith in Christ leads to a departure from external rituals and a life grounded in trust in God. Faith in Christ alone justifies, and that faith brings forth actions that reflect the new life found in Him.

