

# Paul and James

## *What does it mean that our works will judge us?*

### Introduction

Any study on salvation is incomplete, with a discussion on the role of works. In examining Paul's teaching in Romans and Galatians, the apostle makes it crystal clear that our salvation is not of ourselves or by any work of law, Ephesians 2.8-9; Romans 3.20, 28; 4.5. Yet, we have the teaching of James, who says *a person is justified by works and not by faith alone*, James 2.24. How can we harmonize these two writings?

### Comparing Romans 3.28 and James 2.24

Paul says: *for we conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

James says *a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

Immediately, it appears that the two statements conflict. In Romans 3.20, Paul says explicitly that *no one will be justified in his sights by the works of the law*. But James is straightforward when he says works justify a person. How to reconcile these teachings has led to a variety of suggestions:

- Some, like Luther, believe that the Spirit did not inspire James and was recording his opinion, whereas Paul spoke by direct revelation. Luther even questioned whether James should be included in the New Testament canon.
- Others point to how each writer is concentrating on a different emphasis. For example, Paul deals with the problem of dead works, while James focuses on the issue of dead faith.

### *Are Differing Groups of People in View?*

Another group believes that Paul and James are talking about different groups of people. This view believes Paul has initial salvation in mind and unsaved people in view, i.e., the unsaved person comes to Christ for salvation in faith apart from any works. James, however, focuses on how the Christian remains in a state of justification, i.e., by combining faith and works. This was the view taken by Alexander Campbell.<sup>62</sup>

The viewpoint expressed by Campbell is common among those in the Restoration movement. The problem with it, however, is that it cannot be reconciled with Paul's teaching of grace. Besides the fact that Campbell's conclusion negates any application of justification by faith for the Christian, it is no different from what those in the Galatian churches were teaching, who maintained that one is saved by faith but kept saved by works. In previous lessons, we have already discovered that this viewpoint is not biblical, so another explanation must exist.

## ***Are Motives in View?***

A fourth explanation for reconciling the apparent discrepancy between the two passages is that the difference has to do with the motivation of works. It is said that Paul and James address the role of works from different angles but converge on the importance of the motivation behind these works. Paul dismisses "works of law" when performed with the wrong intent, mainly if they're done to earn one's way into heaven, labeling these efforts as "meritorious works." In contrast, James emphasizes that "works of faith," actions carried out with genuine faith as the driving force, are essential for justification. The critical distinction lies in the motivation behind the actions: works done to merit heaven are ineffective, whereas works stemming from authentic faith are vital and uphold one's justification. Both viewpoints agree that the nature of the work itself might remain the same, highlighting that the intention behind the action differentiates meritorious works from works of faith.

But this view has significant problems. For example, Paul's discussions in Romans 3:28 and related passages clarify that merely following God's laws, regardless of the motive, cannot lead to justification, primarily because sin makes such a pathway to justification unattainable. Essentially, no amount of good deeds, even with the purest intentions, can justify sinners under the law system due to the inherent sin issue.

Moreover, the problem isn't about the motivation behind the actions. Paul's argument centers on the fact that, for sinners, justification through works—whether motivated rightly or not—is impossible. It's not the motives that invalidate the works for justification but the presence of sin that makes justification through works unfeasible.

Finally, the logical end of this viewpoint requires one to perform good works without aiming to be justified by them to be justified. It's akin to being told to pay off a debt without intending the payment to wipe out the debt.

## ***How We Can Effectively Reconcile the Two Viewpoints***

Faith and works play crucial roles in how a person is justified, but they interact with the concept of justification in distinct ways. Paul focuses on the direct connection between faith and justification, asserting that faith is what connects an individual directly to being justified. In other words, faith inherently has a relationship with justification, independent of any actions or works. James, however, highlights the importance of works not as an independent route to justification but as an inseparable and natural outcome of genuine faith. According to James, works are a secondary, indirect aspect of justification because they serve as the tangible proof and manifestation of one's faith. Therefore, while Paul emphasizes faith as the primary means of justification, James stresses that such faith is dead and ineffective without the resultant works. This doesn't mean that works justify themselves but that a justified faith will naturally produce works. Works must be present as a product of faith for justification to be fully realized.

## ***What About the Righteousness Produced by Faith and Works?***

Paul asserts that human efforts can never achieve the absolute righteousness required for justification under the law, pointing instead to faith in God's grace as the means of receiving God's righteousness. James speaks of a relative righteousness, i.e., a change in the believer's life direction manifesting through works, which is evidence of saving faith.

## **If Faith justifies us, How do works Judge Us?**

The theological question of how individuals justified by faith can be judged by their works at the final judgment is complex, addressed across both the Old and New Testaments. Scripture extensively discusses God's judgment based on human actions, from Solomon's prayer in 2 Chronicles 6.30, highlighting God's omniscience and fairness, to the New Testament teachings where Jesus and the apostles affirm that every person will be accountable for their deeds (e.g., Matthew 12.36–37, Romans 2.6, 2 Corinthians 5.10). This notion seems at odds with the principle that justification before God comes through faith, not by works (Romans 3.28; Ephesians 2.8–9), presenting a theological dilemma: How does judgment according to works align with justification by faith?

First, the Bible clarifies that while judgment considers one's actions, the ultimate basis for salvation—justification—is faith in God's grace. This distinction does not undermine the role of works but contextualizes it within a framework where faith leads to salvation, and works serve as evidence of that genuine faith. Works are seen as the natural outcome of a living faith, demonstrating the believer's transformation and obedience to God.

### ***Proving the Presence of Genuine Faith***

On the day of judgment, works will be assessed as evidence of genuine faith. Justification before God indeed comes through faith, but it's a faith that manifests through actions, underscoring the adage from James 2.17-18 that faith without works is dead. Works serve as proof of faith's authenticity and our hearts' condition. They are a natural outcome and perfection of faith, akin to how a lamp shines when plugged into a power source—faith connects us to God's grace, resulting in the light of our works.

Even under grace, obedience is expected, as grace doesn't exempt one from this obligation, as Paul teaches in Romans 6. The distinction between grace and the law lies in the requirement of absolute righteousness under the law versus relative righteousness under grace, which is evidence of saving faith. Examples like Jacob and Esau, David and Saul, and Lot's characterization as righteous illustrate this contrast.

### ***Demonstrating the Impartiality of God***

Additionally, judgment, according to works, highlights the impartiality and justice of God. It assures that God's judgments are fair, based on the evidence of one's life and actions, aligning with the Biblical teaching that God does not show favoritism (Acts 10.34-35; Romans 2.11; Ephesians 6.8-9; Colossians 3.25; 1 Peter 1.17). This aspect of judgment affirms God's righteous character and the integrity of His divine law.

God allows our works to speak for themselves to avoid accusations of favoritism or subjectivism. When individuals question why some are with the sheep and others with the goats, displaying their deeds will reveal the fairness of God's judgment. By basing eternal destiny on individual actions, God ensures the righteousness of His judgment, thereby avoiding any appearance of partiality, Job 34.10-12.

### ***To Demonstrate the Significance of Salvation by Grace***

There will be two stages of judgment: first, a decision according to deeds, possibly based on the law, and second, a judgment according to whether one's name is in the Book of Life. Revelation 20:11–15 describes this process.

Then I saw a great white throne and one seated on it. Earth and heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books. Then the sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them; each one was judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Here, all individuals will be judged based on their deeds recorded in "the books," followed by a final determination based on whether their name is in the Book of Life. While the initial judgment based on works finds everyone lacking, entry into heaven ultimately depends on one's acceptance of grace, as indicated by their inclusion in the Book of Life. Those whose names are not found are consigned to the lake of fire. Thus, the final destiny of individuals hinges not on their works judged by the books but on their inclusion in the Book of Life.

## **What's In This For Us?**

**Reconciliation of Faith and Works:** While Paul emphasizes faith as the primary means of justification, James stresses the importance of works as evidence of genuine faith.

**Expectation of Obedience:** Even under grace, obedience is expected. Grace does not exempt believers from the obligation to obey God's commands. This teaches us that while salvation is by grace through faith, true faith is evidenced by obedience to God's will.

**Impartiality of God's Judgment:** God's judgments are fair and based on the evidence of one's life and actions, without showing favoritism. This teaches us to trust God's righteous character and integrity in His judgments.

**The Significance of Salvation by Grace:** Salvation involves two stages of judgment: one based on deeds and another based on inclusion in the Book of Life. This teaches us the importance of accepting God's grace for salvation and understanding that our eternal destiny ultimately depends on our relationship with God rather than our works alone.

## **Conclusion**

The role of works in salvation is complex. While faith is the primary means of justification, works play a crucial role as evidence of genuine faith. In this lesson, we've reaffirmed the expectation of obedience,

understanding that grace does not exempt us from the obligation to live obediently according to God's will. We've also gained insight into the impartiality and fairness of God's judgment, recognizing that His judgments are based on the evidence of our lives without showing favoritism. Finally, we've been reminded of the profound significance of salvation by grace. Our eternal destiny hinges not on our works alone but on our acceptance of God's grace and our relationship with Him, as evidenced by our faith and obedience.

We must be committed to living out our faith authentically through works of obedience and love. Finally, let us trust in God's righteous judgment and rest in the assurance that salvation is by grace through faith, a gift freely given to all who believe.

## For Class Interaction and Discussion

### *Lesson Outline*

1. Comparing Romans 3:28 and James 2:24.
2. Various explanations for reconciling the differences.
  - James was not inspired; Paul was.
  - Dead works vs. dead faith.
  - Differing groups of people.
  - Differing motives for works
3. How faith and works interact in justification.
4. How works judge individuals justified by faith.

### *Thought Questions for Discussion:*

1. What are your initial thoughts on the apparent conflict between Paul's teachings on faith and James' emphasis on works?
2. How do you personally reconcile the differences between Romans 3:28 and James 2:24?
3. Which explanation for the discrepancy between Paul and James' teachings resonates most with you, and why?
4. Do you believe that the motivation behind our works affects our justification? Why or why not?
5. In what ways do faith and works complement each other in the Christian life?
6. How would you define the "righteousness produced by faith" versus the "righteousness produced by works"?
7. How do you understand the concept of works judging individuals justified by faith?
8. What does it mean to you that salvation is by grace through faith?

9. How does understanding the role of works in salvation impact your daily life as a Christian?

10. How can we encourage one another to live out our faith authentically through works of obedience and love?

### **Group Activities:**

Divide into small groups and discuss your interpretations of Romans 3:28 and James 2:24. Share any insights or struggles with reconciling these passages.

### **Final Encouraging Word:**

Remember, our salvation is a gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ. While works are essential as evidence of genuine faith, they do not earn our salvation. Let us walk in obedience, trusting in God's righteousness and the power of His grace to transform our lives. As James 2:26 reminds us, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." Let our faith be alive and active, shining brightly through our works of love and obedience to God.

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<sup>62</sup> In *Paulinus* on p. 215-16, Campbell says: "Paul speaks of the justification of sinners, and James of the justification of christians.... In the final judgment when men's actions and not their states will be examined, *faith is not then accounted to any man for righteousness*.... Without faith it is impossible for a sinner to please God, and without works it is impossible for any to be justified in the day when every man shall be rewarded according to his works....  
... To say, for example, that *no man is justified by his works* is a general truth. But general as it is, it must, from its context, be restricted to unbelievers, for it is just as true and as general that *every christian will be justified by his works*. Nothing else comes in review on the day of judgment...." This quote comes from Cottrell in *What the Bible Says About Grace*, p. 275.