

What Good is Faith without Works?

[James 2:14-26](#)

James, Day 13

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So 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 apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

- James 2:14-26, ESV

Sometimes getting the right answer depends on asking the right question. And sometimes, if all you have is the answer, understanding its true meaning depends on knowing what question prompted it. For centuries, some people have pitted James' teaching here at the end of James 2 against Paul's teaching on Justification by Faith in Romans 3-4 and Galatians 3 against each other, as though the two teachings contradicted each other.

On the surface of it, this kind of thinking might appear to have some merit. James says "*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*" Paul, in Galatians 3, says, "*Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.'*" (Gal. 3:11, ESV) And in Romans 3:28, Paul says, "*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*"

So, is this a blatant contradiction in Scripture? Not if we understand what questions Paul and James are answering.

Paul is answering the question of how a person can be justified before God. To counter self-righteousness and legalism, Paul affirms that only faith in Jesus Christ can justify us, not works of the law. No one can ever be justified on the basis of the law, because we are all condemned by the law as law-breakers. So, Paul is focused on the works of the law as a possible basis for our justification. In answer to this kind of question, "*one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*"

James has a different question in mind altogether: How do we know if we have real, saving faith or just a dead, imitation faith? In other words, how do we know if our faith is alive or dead, genuine or a mere cheap imitation? In answer to this kind of question, "*Faith without works is dead.*" The kind of faith that does not lead to good works is not genuine, living, saving faith.

Neither Paul nor James would say that our faith and our works together form the basis of our justification before a holy God. Only the righteousness of Christ is perfect enough to be the basis for our justification. We lay hold of the righteousness of Christ by faith alone. And neither Paul nor James would say that a profession of faith that makes no difference in how you live your life is true faith. They would both say such a so-called faith is an empty profession, a lifeless sham. Real faith loves, trusts, and obeys.

So, what good is faith without works? It's no good at all - not because we need works to be the basis for our justification, but because faith without works is no real faith at all. It's no more than the affirmation a demon can make. Or, as someone else (Phillip Melancton?) has famously said, "We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith which remains alone."