DO JAMES AND PAUL CONTRADICT CONCERNING GRACE?

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Scripture is a song, borne of the Spirit, repeated over time and countless generations, a gift of precious worth to those whose hearts are in tune to its underlying faith-inspiring tones.

No matter how closely we may examine any one text, we must remember that it is but one movement in the symphony that is “Scripture” as a whole. The glorious balance and harmony of God’s revelation in Scripture is found in the entirety of its testimony. Only when we allow all the parts to speak, first in their own context, but then, together, without assuming (as is so often the case in Western culture today) contradiction, but allowing for harmonization, can we ever find the unified message of Scripture.

An Apparent Problem

When the immediate context of an author is ignored, it is very easy to make allegations of inconsistency and contradiction with other biblical writers. When two writers use similar language but in different contexts, insinuations of error and conflict will surely surface, especially from the pens of those who are seeking to overthrow biblical teaching. One of the classic examples of this is found in the repeated assertion by critics that there is a fundamental contradiction between the views of James and Paul on the matter of faith and works. Scholars often assert the contradiction as a given, almost never allowing for any harmonization of the two writers.

A fair analysis of the relevant texts, however, demonstrate that James and Paul are not, in fact, in conflict, but instead are teaching the same truths in two different contexts. The conflict is apparent, not real. It only appears as if there is contradiction, when the reality is quite different.

We begin with Paul’s assertion that we are justified in the sight of God by faith alone. This is the essence of his argumentation from Romans 3:21 through 5:1, but can be summarized in his statement, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Despite the
modern attempt on the part of some to turn justification into a statement solely about church membership, the reality is that Paul is addressing how those who find themselves justly condemned as sinners can find peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Paul teaches clearly in Romans and Galatians that God has made a way of peace through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and that all men, Jew and Gentile, must come to Him through this one gracious way. The receipt of this peace is by faith, so that it might be in accordance with grace (Rom. 4:16). No amount of law keeping can bring a person a right standing with God, for to Paul, the law brings a knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20, Gal. 3:23–24). It was never God’s purpose that the law be a means of obtaining righteousness. Instead, the one who breaks the law is condemned thereby (Gal. 3:10–11).

Paul’s primary proof of the fact of justification by faith apart from deeds of the law is Abraham (Rom. 4:1–3, Gen. 15:6). Since Abraham was justified before God by faith in the promises of God prior to any kind of legal obedience on his part (such as his receiving the sign of circumcision), the priority of the promise to law is established. It is just this example that raises the allegation of conflict with James.

James wrote to the primitive Christian community in its earliest days of existence. His letter is very much an “in house” epistle, one speaking to the necessity of living life in light of a new and altered reality. “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures” (James 1:18). How, then, should we live? This is the focus of his epistle of exhortation.

It is in this context that he speaks of deedless faith, that oxymoronic attitude that says, “Yes, I believe, but I do not act in accordance with my confession.” He writes,

*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?...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?* (James 2:14, 17–20 ESV)

This then leads to the assumed main point of conflict with Paul, that of the matter of Abraham. James writes, “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” (James 2:21–24).

The contradiction seems obvious, at least in the minds of many. Paul says Abraham was justified before God by faith apart from deeds of the law. James says Abraham was justified by works and not by faith alone. This is a clear, patent, incontestable contradiction, taken by many to indicate a rupture in the early church, witnessed in the New Testament canon itself. Is it fair, however, to make such grand assumptions? Is there a compelling reason to accept such accusations of infidelity to the message of Christ on the part of Paul and James, especially when they themselves do not attest to such a problem?

Careful attention to the language of both writers leads us to recognize that this “apparent” contradiction does not exist in reality. In fact, if care is exercised in reading both writers in context, they are saying the very same things. Paul is not promoting a deedless faith. In fact, Paul often speaks of the importance of good works, and says God has ordained that believers produce good works (Eph. 2:10). He denies with force, however, that even the best works that man can produce can have any weight in justifying a person before God.

The key to accurately handing these texts is found in allowing James to define his own context. He is speaking against a deedless faith, a faith that is empty and without evidence of its existence. He decry the abnormality of the claim of faith that can give no evidence of its existence, just as he will decry the abnormality of a mouth that both blesses God and curses men. The contexts, then, of James and Paul differ fundamentally: Paul is speaking of how men are made right before God, James is warning the Christian community concerning the danger of deedless faith, a false faith that cannot save. The key phrase for James is “show me” (2:18). For him, true faith can prove its existence. He simply is not addressing the relationship of faith and works for salvation, but is instead addressing the necessity of deeds resulting from true saving faith. As to James’ use of Abraham, I have commented elsewhere, It is the centrality of Abraham in Jewish national existence that causes James to refer to him, not an attempted counter-argument against a Pauline doctrine….Indeed, polemics who need to find in this passage a foundation for some kind of synergistic, works-salvation system, insist that the fact that James uses the identical term for “justified” and the identical phrase for “by works” (see,
for example, Rom. 3:20, 4:2, Gal. 2:16) proves, beyond question, that we must read James’ use of these terms in the same context that Paul uses in Romans and Galatians. But we have already seen that James is arguing against a use of the word faith (a deedless, dead, empty, useless faith that exists only in the realm of words not of action) that is not paralleled in the Pauline passages that speak of how one is justified. Second, Paul speaks of justification before God (Gal. 3:11) or in His sight (Rom. 3:20) while the context of James is show me. The assertion that the verbal parallels over-ride the immediate contexts must be rejected for it has no basis. James’ use must be allowed to stand on its own. As a result, the translation of the original Greek term used by James in 2:21 as “shown to be righteous” or “considered righteous” (NIV) flows not from a pre-commitment to a theological perspective, but from the context itself.5

This is not theological gerrymandering. It involves the same careful examination of context, argument, and usage that any of us would demand for our own writings, and that must be logically and rationally demanded of the reading of any ancient document. Paul and James speak with one view regarding faith: Paul emphasizes its sufficiency to save without the addition of human merit, and James emphasizes that it is not a dead, deedless faith, but a faith that can prove its existence!

—James White

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notes

1 Except when otherwise noted Bible quotations are the author’s own translation.

2 This is the view of the so-called “New Perspective on Paul.” See Guy Prentiss Waters, Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004).

3 Note that the ESV and NASB (“that faith”), NIV (“such faith”), and NET (“this kind of faith”) all recognize the anaphoric use of the article in the original language, specifying a particular kind of deedless faith, just defined.

4 For a full discussion and exegesis of the text of James 2:14–26, see The God Who Justifies (Bethany House, 2001), 329–54. In this work I provide in-depth analysis of the context of James 2 especially as it relates to the deedless faith James is arguing against, and how this differs from Paul’s use of faith as the nonmeritorious embracing of the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

5 Ibid., 345–46.