

Faith and Works  
The Great Controversy

Roman Catholic theologians have always leaned heavily on the second chapter of James to maintain that justification is not by faith alone but by faith and works. But that was not received well by many within the Christian movement. In fact, many were saying, and are still saying, “That justification is a free gift, that we receive it by faith alone, and that Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Galatians back them up.” But at first glance, if we are honest, we must admit that James does seem to disagree with Paul, and teach that works are necessary for salvation.

However, after a closer investigation, we find there is no conflict between Paul and James. Paul taught us that salvation is by faith alone, and James tells us that there is a true and a false faith. A man who claims to have faith (salvation) but has no works is a man who has false faith. True faith shows itself in good deeds.

Therefore, we are justified by faith alone, but justifying faith is never found alone; it always brings forth good fruit. Older writers would say, “We are not justified by making a profession of faith but by possessing faith.” Furthermore, they espoused that a person who professes faith and then lives a life characterized by unrighteousness is surely deluding himself with counterfeit faith.

We must understand that faith is not “mere assent.” Even the demons believe that God exists, said James, but rather than delighting in this knowledge, they respond with shuddering (James 2:19). It's true, faith involves knowledge, faith involves assent, and faith involves trust or commitment. We must know something about God's truth, and we must assent to the truth of it, but if that is all we do, we are no better than the demons. True faith goes beyond mere assent and involves a personal relationship of trust and commitment to God, and such true faith will always show itself in deeds of love, faithfulness in service, and obedience.

One writer said it best, “James used the verb *justify* when he wrote, “Was not our ancestor Abraham justified for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” (James 2:21). The Greek word *justify* can mean “legal justification,” which Paul taught is received by faith alone, or it can mean “demonstrative justification,” which was James' meaning here. Abraham's good work demonstrated his justification and filled up the legal justification that James, as well as Paul, said he received by faith (James 2:23).”

Scripture: James 2:14-26; Romans 10:9-13; Ephesians 2:8-10.

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