

The Relationship Between Faith and Works

The apostle Paul presents faith as the alone instrument of salvation. Note the word alone. The word places salvation apart from works – independent of all works in order to receive salvation. Paul wrote to the church at Rome and said, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28). The word “without” says that faith stands alone as a means of being justified. The law is said to be holy, just, and good; yet, it cannot save (Romans 7:12). Faith is the only means of salvation.

To make his position clearer, Paul extends his position to works of any kind: “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned [counted] of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Romans 4:4-5). The man, who by faith alone puts his trust in Christ Jesus for salvation, shall not be disappointed. Heaven will be his home. On the other hand however, the man who by faith and his works trusts Christ Jesus for salvation shall be disappointed. Hell will be his home.

Salvation is a gift of God to undeserving sinners. A gift is what it says it is, a gift. A gift is given freely with no strings attached. Paul said, “For by grace [unmerited favor] are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). How much clearer could Scripture be.

Now let us look at the other side of the picture.

The apostle James writes about faith and works differently than the apostle Paul. One reason is the difference in the type of letter and purpose of writing. In letters like Romans and Ephesians, Paul presents a doctrinal treatise. His concern is to systematically lay out certain truths. James, however, is writing what we call wisdom literature. His concern is to pastorally exhort his readers. Because of this James says things about faith and works that some people think contradicts what Paul teaches. But that is not the case at all. When you read carefully Paul’s writings and compare them to what James writes in the same context you will see that they both agree. James’s concern was to preach against empty, formal belief, which he says is really not a living or saving faith.

James says, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works” (James 2:17-18). James’ point is that for faith to be alive, it must produce works. Using the example of Abraham, whose faith was finally proved by his willingness to offer his son, he writes in a way that seems to be even more challenging to Paul’s doctrine of faith alone. But James’ point is made clear by his elaboration on the matter by, for instance, verse 22, which says, “Seest thou how faith

wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect [complete]?” (James 2:22) This point Paul would have strongly affirmed, that a living faith, which alone saves us through Christ Jesus, is the only one which proves itself through good and obedient works. John Calvin said, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that really saves us never is alone.”

James, like Paul, distinguishes between faith and works. Paul emphasizes that we are saved through faith apart from works; James emphasizes that the faith that really saves us is a faith that does work. Together, they provide us a well-rounded New Testament teaching on faith alone as that which saves us to a life that is characterized by good works in living worship unto our Lord.

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