

Q. Why does James say, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only"? (James 2:24). This seems to directly contradict Paul's teaching that we are justified by faith.

A. In James 2:21, James says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" But Paul, in Romans 4:1-5 says,

What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned 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.

Many people take what James says to be a contradiction of Paul. But what do we see when we read Hebrews 11? For brevity, let's concentration on just Abraham. This chapter says, "By faith Abraham...obeyed...went out...sojourned...dwelling in tabernacles... looked for a city...offered up Isaac" (verses 8-10, 17). These are all works. This is how we know of Abraham's faith (as well as the other people in the chapter). We see by what he did that Abraham believed God.

I am not saying, as some mistakenly do, that a combination of faith and works justifies. It is by faith that we receive the justification that Jesus has already procured with His works. Our works add nothing to the perfect, complete work Jesus has already done (for more information, see my "By Faith Alone" article <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/endofreformation2.htm>). But we show our faith to others by what we do.

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There can be such a thing as a false profession of faith. James seems to have been addressing this problem. He apparently knew of people who said they believed but never showed the love of God in their lives even when a need stared them right in the face. Notice James 2:15-16: "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?" This was a demonstration of a lack of faith. The people doing this were apparently oblivious to their problem. They were not worried about their faith. (If you are worried whether you are saved or have faith, read any of these articles: "How can I know that I am saved?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/assuranceQA.htm>; "How to Obtain Certain Knowledge of Forgiveness of Sins" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/mullerforgiveness.htm>; and "The Resting Place of Faith" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/restingplace.html>).

Remember that James was writing to the "twelve tribes which are scattered abroad"—the Jews. As Jews did, these Jews would claim Abraham as their father (Matthew 3:9). But James shows them that the only way we know of Abraham's faith is by what he did (2:21-23). Then James tells them something unexpected. Even Rahab the harlot had faith. How do we know? By what she did. She did something that only a believer would have done. James never says that these works are what saved Abraham or Rahab. He does not say these works were supposed to give Abraham or Rahab assurance. Granted, when taken out of context, it sounds like he is saying that they were justified by works and not by faith only. But James explains himself in the context. Notice verse 18: "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 is writing about the demonstration of faith. The works simply let other people know of our faith. This is the key to understanding what James is saying. Paul has no disagreement with this, and writes of the same thing in Romans 4. Again, referring to Abraham, he says, "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised" (verses 11-12). This walking in the steps of faith is the very same thing that James is writing of.

James is reacting to people with a false profession of faith. This is why he says in James 2:21: "But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" It is as if these people were saying, "I believe that there is a chair over there." So James tells them, All right, now show me your belief in that chair by sitting on it. If they are afraid to do so then their belief is dead; it isn't real. James is telling them to demonstrate their belief.

I know I believe. And *God* knows I believe, and it is by the instrument of belief that I receive justification (Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:11, 24). But *you* don't know that I believe unless I show it in my life. Thus, James does not say, "I will show *God* my faith by my works." And he does not say, "I will shew *me* my faith by my works." He says, "I will shew *thee* my faith by my works" (verse 18). He is saying the same thing that Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13 when he writes of the deeds that show outwardly the salvation that God is working in us: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." So, when we understand the context, we see that there is no contradiction between James 2:24 and Paul's understanding of faith and works. The Bible does not contradict itself. It has one Author—the Holy Spirit.

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