

Does James 2:14–26 contradict Romans 4, or complement it
in regard to justification by faith without works?

I. Statement of the Problem

The entire chapter of Romans 4 is a defense of the fact that Christians are justified by faith, not by works: Abraham's justification was "sola fide," or by faith alone. James, on the other hand, appears to argue for just the opposite: He is denouncing faith without works as dead and useless. In fact, based on the same Old Testament testimony concerning Abraham, James concludes, "that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:14).

Therefore, the Epistle of James has become the subject of significant debate at least since Martin Luther who -fighting against the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church- considered the epistle as uninspired.

In particular, the James passage has become something of a battlefield both in the *Lordship salvation* debate, as well as in the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* dialogue.

Are there any soteriological discrepancies between James and Paul?

II. Proposed Views

A. The View that works is a necessary means for salvation.

This view, held by the Roman Catholic Church, states: "In fact, the only place in the Bible where the phrase 'faith alone' appears is in James 2:24 where it says we are justified by works and NOT by faith alone. So the Bible never teaches anywhere that we are justified, saved, or anything else, by faith alone. [...] We are now in a system of grace where God rewards our works when done with faith in Christ" (John Salza, http://www.scripturecatholic.com/my_top_ten.html#X, July 30th, 2009) "Paul agrees in principle with James that the "whole law" must in some sense be kept (Gal 5:3/James 2:10)" (Luke T. Johnson, Brother of Jesus, friend of God. Studies in the Letter of James, p. 13.)

B. The View that the Epistle of James contradicts Scripture and therefore is not part of the inspired texts.

"It is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works. [...] The epistle of James, however, only drives you to the law, and its works. [...] I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my bible" (Martin Luther, Martin Luther, selections from his writings, ed. John Dillenberger (1961), p. 35).

C. The View that Paul is teaching about justification not on basis of works, but James is talking about works as consequence and visible proof of salvation al-

ready received. Different arguing approaches have been made, partly overlapping:

- 1) Different usage of *works*: In these two passages, ἔργον is used in different ways: works of law and works of faith. “The key is to differentiate between 1) the (wrong) ‘works’, of which faith comes, and 2) the (good) ‘works’, coming out of faith.” (Thomas Schirrmacher. Der Römerbrief, I, 208). “It’s miles between James’ ‘works of faith’ and Paul’s ‘works of the law’” (Gerhard Maier. Der Brief des Jakobus, p. 132). James is not discussing “works” (ceremonial works) as a means of salvation as Paul in Galatians 3 and Romans 4, but works as proof of faith (A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, James 2:18).
- 2) Different usage of *justification*: “Here we must realize that James is using the word *justified* in a different sense from the way Paul uses it.” (Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, p. 731). James is using this word in the sense of someone’s proving or showing his righteousness before others: “the demonstration of righteousness from its effects in the sight of men” (Jean Calvin. A harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, eds. D. W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance, p. 285).
- 3) Different usage of *faith*: James is not contrasting two methods of salvation (faith versus works). Instead, he contrasts two kinds of faith: living faith that saves and dead faith that does not (John MacArthur, The MacArthur Study Bible, p. 1930); James deals with a faith as mere intellectual assent, a simple agreeing with certain facts.

III. Preferred View

Within Protestantism, all agree that acceptance before God is through faith alone and by grace alone, but they differ on whether true justification can ever be followed by leading a worldly life or even apostasy. This issue must be set aside for further studies.

After a close analysis of the passages, the preferred view of the author is option “C 3” listed above – that Paul and James do not contradict but complement each other by treating different qualities of faith.

A. Literary Style

The book of James has been compared with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, particularly the book of Proverbs. It is not a doctrinal treatise but an intensely practical manual for Christian living (John MacArthur, “James“, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series (1998), p. 2.) „The wisdom character of James and its multiple connections to biblical wisdom tradition are recognized by virtually all commentaries. [...] The legal and prophetic aspects of the biblical tradition are equally important.” (Johnson, The Letter of James, p. 33). This must be kept in mind, when accusing James to have an anti-Paulinic polemic: In fact “in [the epistle of] James we do not find any substantial theology” (Paul Feine, Theologie des Neuen Testaments, p. 657). “No profound theologian, James’ genius lies in his profound moral earnestness” (Douglas J. Moo, The Letter of James, p. 9).

In contrast, Romans instead is a well-structured doctrinal letter with missionary ambitions (Schirrmacher, pp. 28-31), including sixteen chapters of more or less soteriological teaching, written by a well-trained ex-Pharisee and scribe.

Conclusively, James' focus is more on practical-ethical results, Paul's on logical and doctrinal foundations.

B. The Principle of the Priority of the Original Languages: Lexical Study

Both authors are operating with three main words in their arguments: a) works, b) to justify and c) faith/believing. In order to understand their messages accurately we must consider the words used in the Greek originals. Our first finding is unambiguously as each author is using a) ἔργον, b) δικαίω and c) πίστις / πιστεύω.

- 1) ἔργον: In the NT this noun means “work”, “task” (Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, “ἔργον,” Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, II, 49). In the LXX a great number of different Hebrew terms are being rendered with ἔργον or ἐργάζεσθαι (Gerhard Delling, “ἔργον,” Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (1976), ed. Gerhard Kittel, II, 636.) The general meaning of ἔργον lexically includes works of God the father (foremost in the Gospel of John; e.g. 5:36; 4:34; 9:4; 17:4) and good and evil works of man (e.g. Jn 3:19; 7:7).
- 2) Δικαίω: God is justifying the wicked by faith on the basis of God's gracious action in Christ (Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, p. 175.). But both Paul and James cite Genesis 15:6 in their discussion of Abraham's justification. This historic event and its larger Old Testament context appears to describe Abraham's justification in a forensic sense, not in demonstrative or probative sense (R. Bruce Compton, “James 2:21-24 and the justification of Abraham,” Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal, 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 28, 26)
- 3) Πίστις/πιστεύω: These words are dealing with a central theological concept, one that represents the correct relationship to God and ultimately the essence of the Christian religion itself (Balz/Schneider, “πιστεύω,” III, 92).

So far, we have explored that both authors are using the same Greek words carrying a broad meaning. Does this literal unity mean we actually have a theological disunity of two apostles inspired by the one God?

Messages are being transported in one or more sentences, never in separated and isolated words. Hence, we have to examine the connection in which these words stand. Here verse 19 becomes exceedingly helpful: “You believe (πιστεύω) that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe (πιστεύω), and shudder.” It appears evident that the whole dispute is not about faith in the sense of Paul's usage, but of a common knowledge of God. Though James seems to accept the *faith* (“You do well”) – it is not a saving faith, otherwise the demons would not shudder. Such a faith “can no more connect man with God, than the sight of the sun carry him up to heaven; but it is certain that by faith we come nigh to God” (John Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, p. 205).

For the argument of σώζω carrying here indeed an eternal salvation emphasis instead of salvation from a present concern see Gale Z. Heide, “The Soteriology of James 2:14”, Grace Theological Journal, 12.1 (1992), 69-97.

C. The Principle of the Priority of the Original Languages: Syntax

Having discovered the range of a word's meaning, the next step is to ascertain which of those denotations the author intended (Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation, 2nd ed., p. 110).

Πίστις: What does James mean by "faith," especially when questioning it at the end of verse 14: "can that faith save him"? This is a rhetorical question and with the negative particle μή the answer intended by James is *no*. (Compton, p. 22; Heide, p. 74). Therefore, it must be granted that James uses faith here in a sense other than saving faith. "This is the same as though he had said that we do not attain salvation by a frigid and bare knowledge of God, which all confess to be most true" (John Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, p. 203.)

Furthermore, πίστις in verse 14 is particularized by an anaphoric article that has a pointing force to it, reminding the reader of the faith *without works* mentioned some words ago (Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament, 219.) That means that James is referring to "[this kind of] faith" – not to any kind of faith (Compton, p. 22).

James does not refuse faith, but a faith surgically dissected from works: "Show me your faith without (χωρίς) the works" (James 2:18): χωρίς means more literally "apart from" (Marvin Richardson Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament, I, 744). James does not speak about faith very independent from works, but faith *separately* or *apart* from works, quasi *by itself* (Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, "χωρίς," Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament, IV, 412).

D. The Principle of Context: Near Context of the Passage

The very context of the passage in question shows that James in no way is neglecting faith as a means of salvation. Rather he is actually assuming it: "if someone says he has faith" (v. 14). Faith and even its confession is a prerequisite, from which James is challenging deeds.

Again, in verse 18 he is challenging "show me your faith without the works " Obviously, he does not believe that a faith could be in any way presented without means of works. Rather, he is convinced that someone confessing faith has to demonstrate this faith: "I will show you my faith by my works." Apparently, this is not the logical proof Paul would give but it is the method of this practically directed counselor.

As already mentioned above, some scholars want to differentiate between the sorts of "works" the two authors might have had in mind. Following the lexical research, ἔργον is not a *terminus technicus* but a plain and common word. James gives the examples of a needy brother and sister (an assumed situation, v. 15f) and Abraham (a historical account, v. 21f). By that, the reader understands these works in a general sense. Likewise, Paul is arguing without giving a definition of "works": "Now to the one who works [...]" (Rom 4:4). James quotes Gen 15:6, which forcefully claims that God credited righteousness to Abraham solely based on his faith – years before the offering of Isaac. Anyway, Paul's argument is that even works done 450 years before the Law and motivated by Abraham's desire to love and obey God are excluded. What kind of works besides the work of the Law James could have meant? Admittedly, Rahab did a work of charity by

protecting the two Hebrew spies. Nevertheless, Abraham's offering of his beloved son cannot be taken as charity: it was an act of obedience to a clear command of God. Thus, the tension between James and Paul cannot be resolved by distinguishing their meaning of "works" (Compton, pp. 25-26). Anyway, one cannot urge both passages under a common doctrine just because of the usage of the same word. Each passage has its own didactic purpose (Maier, p. 132).

Significantly, both authors are referring to Abraham's life and the works performed by this patriarch. This proves the similarity of the entity "works" in their minds. Evidently, it is not a different understanding of "works" in its literal sense that leads the authors to their apparent different positions. Abraham's faith produced works and, thus, was a true and saving faith. James uses faith in a two-fold sense in these verses: a false faith and a true faith. Moreover, he gives advises how to differentiate the one against the other because both are "confessing faiths."

E. The Principle of Context: Context in the Letter of James

James does not dispute *contra* faith and *pro* works. The overall message of the Epistle of James is, "examine your faith whether it is real and saving." This faith is a "gracious gift from God" (1:17f). But he challenges his readers, "prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (1:22.) In 1:23 he repeats his warning about hearing but not doing the word of God. On the other hand, he praises the one who was not "a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer" (1:25).

In 2:1 James is commanding to hold the "faith of Jesus Christ". This genitive may be read as either Genitive of source or Descriptive genitive (Albert L. Lukaszewski, The Lexham Syntactic Greek New Testament: Expansions and Annotations, Ja 2:1). Both grammatical interpretations lead to a divine faith that expresses itself in holy works.

F. The Principle of Context: Context in the New Testament

James is not presenting anti-Paulinic polemic as some argue (Martin Hengel, Der Jakobusbrief als antipaulinische Polemik, cit. in Maier, p.39). Quite the opposite, James is continuously inviting to examine the confessed faith being real and saving. On the other hand, the message of Romans is salvation by the means of faith. However, even Paul agrees in works. Often he calls them "fruits": We became children of God "in order that we might bear fruit for God." (Rom 7:4; cf. Gal 5:22; Eph 5:9; Phil 1:11).

It is beyond question that Paul values these fruits as an emission of faith. Works do not matter before salvation, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9). He clarifies the only correct sequence, by stating that faith is not a result *of works*. He continues to explain this order by teaching what the result *of faith* is: we are "created [...] for good works". These were "prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Eph 2.10). Here again, the divine source is not only attributed to faith but also to works, which are expected to flow out naturally from a truly Christian (cf. Tit 3:1.5.8). This is in perfect agreement with James' teaching.

James does not make definite whether he has a special type of "works" in mind; especially he never connects the term "work" or "deed" to law. Instead, he

uses it in the sense of moral deed or effort (Johnson, Brother, p. 12). Comparably, Paul is using ἔργον predominantly in this same sense (Schirrmacher, p. 208); only 17 times of some 70 occurrences he speaks about the more restricted sense of “your work of the law” (Johnson, p.12). However, this more general meaning is but qualified in combination with πίστις: The works of faith – as a contrast to works of the law. Paul gives thanks to God for the “works of faith” of the Thessalonian believers (1Thess 1:3; 2Thess 1:11), but he also warns about the “deeds of the law,” e.g. Rom 3:20.28 and three times in Gal 3:16 (Schirrmacher, p. 208). Nevertheless, it is not James but Paul who declares, “For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified” (Rom 2:13). In the remarkably similar statement in James 1:22-25, James uses the term “word” for what must be both heard and practiced.

A third connecting aspect has to be presented: The perfecting of faith. John teaches, “But whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected (τελειόω)” (1Jn 2:5). In addition, John calls the love of God “perfected (τελειόω)” if we love one another (1Jn 4:12). This is the same what James (2:22) addresses by arguing for a faith which was “perfected (τελειόω)” by loving the brother (charity for the needy, 2:15f) and obeying God’s commandments (Abraham’s example, 2:21ff). Neither John nor James understands τελειόω as if something was missing to make the faith coming into existence. Our prime role model, the Lord Jesus used this word also in order to describe his mission “for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish (τελειόω) —the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.” We do the works the Father has given to us, and by this, we show that real, saving faith was granted to us. If there are no works to be seen, the reason will be found in a non-existing, i.e. dead, faith (Ja 2:26).

G. The Principle of the Analogy of Faith

The Bible is the written Word of God and consequently is inerrant and infallible (cf. John 17:17; 10:35; 2Tim 3:16). Therefore, when properly interpreted, there can ultimately be no conflict between the statements of the two human authors (“analogy of faith”).

The doctrine of justification *sola fide* as taught in Romans 4 is not sole Paulinic as it seems. We remember the critical situation between Paul and Cephas reported in Gal 2:11-21: Even the apostle Peter and Barnabas, who were reputed to be pillars (Gal 2:9), ‘surrendered’ to the clear teaching of *sola fide* (Eduard Böhl. Dogmatik, p. 382).

Likewise, works as a proof of faith is not a doctrine by James alone: Paul teaches in Romans 2:13: “for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.” Also does the apostle John: „Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth“ (1Jn 3:18). Not surprisingly even Christ, the Lord, himself warned, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.” (Mt 7:21)