

# On the Statements of St. Paul and St. James Respecting Justification

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(with an introduction by Rich Lusk)

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***Pastoral Introduction:** The question of how to reconcile Paul on James on the all-important subject of justification has caused many Bible readers many a headache down through the centuries. Many proposed solutions seem plausible at first, but crumble under closer inspection. Other solutions exalt one apostle over another (usually Paul at the expense of James), with unsatisfactory results. How can we do justice to both these inspired writers and still present a coherent, unified biblical theology of justification? Must we rob James to pay Paul? Or is some there way of harmonizing their respective statements on justification, such that we can deal faithfully with the language of Scripture on its own terms?*

*Sadler's solution seeks to maintain the integrity of the Scriptures as a whole. He shows that there is really no conflict at all between James and Paul, not by watering down James (as is sometimes done), but by showing that Paul is just as insistent on works as James. Indeed, in the canon of Scripture as a whole, James says nothing unusual. His words can be taken at face value and applied accordingly. James is not out of step with the gospel. He is not a legalist, whose epistle somehow got smuggled into the canon.*

*As a pastor who wants to be faithful in proclaiming the whole counsel of God, I especially appreciate Sadler's desire to carve out space for us to be able to speak as the Bible speaks.*

*Sadler is exactly right: we have sometimes put our desire to be "consistent" over our obligation to teach the full orbbed truth of God's word. We must learn to speak as the Bible speaks without reservation or qualification. We must learn to explain hard passages without explaining them away.*

*The following excerpt is taken from M. F. Sadler's late 19<sup>th</sup> century commentary on James. I hope a contemporary audience will find it useful.*

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There has been held to be a very strong antagonism between St. Paul and St. James on the subject of Justification, since St. Paul writes: "We conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. Iii.28), and since St.

James writes: "Ye see, then, how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (ii.24).

Now I would first of all assume this difference to its full extent, and ask—supposing that these statements are counter-statements—what is to be done? Are we virtually to treat one or other of these statements as uninspired, by making the one so bend to the other, that it would be better if one of them had not been written, or are we to hold both as far as we can in their integrity, and believe that God will, in the end, show that both are reconcilable? Take as an illustration grace and free-will: the grace of God must be omnipotent, and we should think would overpower all within its sphere of action; and yet men are constantly called upon to save themselves—not to fall from grace—to make their calling and election sure. Now every true Christian, without attempting to reconcile theoretically these two things, acts upon them, one might say, every day of his life. He invokes grace, he trusts to grace, he grows in grace, and yet he lives, and runs, and fights as determinedly as if all depended upon himself.

Now so it may be with these two seemingly antagonistic views of Justification. If they are antagonistic, and both writers are the organs of the Spirit of God, we must act on both and leave the reconciliation to God, and to the time when our present part knowledge shall be done away.

Now in order, if possible, to work, as one may say, to an understanding, let us first examine by itself St. Paul's teachings on this matter, and let us see whether we are called upon to reconcile St. James with St. Paul before we have reconciled St. Paul with himself, for St. Paul, I need hardly say, wrote much more than Rom. iii.28.

Then in the next place let us consider the reason which led St. Paul to assert so earnestly that Justification is by faith without (or apart from) the deeds of the law.

First of all, then, we say that there are fifty places or more in the Pauline Epistles which assert exactly the same truth as St. James asserts in this chapter.

We will take as many of these as the limited space we have to confine ourselves to will allow.

1. Romans ii.6: "God, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life; but to them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath...but glory, honour and peace to every man that worketh good."

There is no place in the Apostolical Epistles more peremptory than this in demanding good works as the condition of salvation. There is actually no mention of faith, which there is in St. James, though of course every line which St. Paul wrote presupposes faith.

2. Gal. v. 6: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love." If St. Paul had not appended the words "which worketh by love," he might be cited as emphasizing that faith

alone, by itself, avails; but by defining the faith to be that "which worketh by love," he lays down what St. James does, that by the works of love faith has power, and by nothing else; in fact, that faith without love is dead, and with love it is alive.

3. Similar to the above is 1 Cor. vii. 19. "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God" (is something availing to the favour of God). Here also faith is not mentioned, and the place could not possibly have been written by a Solifidian or Lutheran or Antinomian.

4. Similarly 1 Corinth. xiii.2. "Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing." The Apostle here most undoubtedly thinks that he cites the highest possible degree of faith, and he says of it that it is not of the least avail without love.

5. 1 Cor. ix. 24, 27. "So run that ye may obtain. I keep under my body and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means," &c. Running is sustained, continuous, even violent exertion. Keeping under one's body is also to very many a most irksome and distasteful work, and certainly implies very much more than mere faith.

6. Again the inference to be drawn from the example of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea, and falling in the wilderness (1 Cor. x. 1-10), demands very much more on the part of Christians than faith only.

7. 2 Cor. v. 9. "Wherefore we labour, that whether present or absent we may be accepted of him." Here is demanded labour, and labour that we may be accepted.

8. Gal. v. 24. "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts." This demands far more from the man who desires to be saved, than what is usually understood by works.

9. Phil. ii. 13. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you."

10. Phil. iii. 13. "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

11. Again, 2 Thess. i. 8: "Taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel," &c.

12. 1 Tim. i.19. "Holding faith and a good conscience."

13. 1 Tim. ii.15. "She shall be saved through the childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity, and holiness with sobriety." Here is not faith only, but faith united with charity and holiness.

14. 1 Tim. iv. 16. "Take heed unto thyself, and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee."

15. 1 Tim. vi. 18. "That they (the rich) do good and be rich in good works. Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come that they may lay hold on eternal life."

16. Titus ii.12. "Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly," &c.

17. Hebrews iv. 11. "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall," &c.

18. Heb. V. 9. "Being made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation to all them that obey him."

19. Heb. x. 36. "Ye have need of patience, that after ye have done the will of God ye might receive the promise."

20. xii. 28. "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom...let us have (or hold fast) grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear."

Now all these places,--and they might be doubled--are much stronger on the side of works, i.e., of human exertion and endurance, than the single assertion of St. James, and they show that St. Paul when he writes, "We conclude that a man is justified without (or apart from) the deeds of the law," does not mean that a man is justified in the sense of being in, or continuing in, the favour of God without exertion, without labour, without love, without patience, without self denial, without discipline, without a good conscience. These all are works to which the works of the law, as commonly understood by the unconverted Jew, are as nothing: and these things are treated by the Apostles not as ornaments of profession, but as necessities laid upon us by God if we are to attain to everlasting salvation.

Moreover, all these places which I have enumerated are aspects of justification. Everyone of them implies justification in the man who has them. Thus (1) patient continuance in well doing implies justification. It is absurd to suppose that anyone who by patient continuance in well doing seeks for glory, honour, and immortality is unjustified. If he is, then justification is some mere matter of words, which, I need not say, no Christian truth can be. Again, a man whose faith works by love (2), and has both faith and charity (4) is justified. Again, men who so run as to obtain (5), who labour so that they may be accepted of God (7), who have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts (8), who "work out their own salvation" (9), "who press towards the mark of the high calling of God" (10), "who obey the Gospel," "who hold faith with a good conscience," (12) are justified. If any one denies this or hesitates about it, he ought to see whether his own justification is a matter of words or formulas or whether it is something real.

We now come to the second matter which we proposed to consider. Why does St. Paul insist so strongly upon excluding the law from the work of justifying the sinner? We answer because he desired the law to be kept. He tells us this very distinctly in the very heart and centre of his Epistle to the Romans: "What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh. God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit" (Rom. viii. 1-4). Justification with St. Paul is, as he

says, justification of life (Rom. v. 18) not of imputation merely, but of life. If so it cannot be by the law, by any mere law whatsoever, for he says, "If a law had been given which could have life, verily righteousness should have been by the law" (Gal. iii. 21). The law, i.e., of the Decalogue, was mere command accompanied with no gift of life. Consequently having no life, it could not give justification of life. In order to this in the counsels of God a Person must come Who was capable of being an Adam, a Head to the race; this Person, the Son of God, came, offered Himself up as a Sacrifice for sin, and rose from the dead in order that He might impart to men of His Life. It is not by the law, but by faith or believing that we lay hold of this Person, that we are joined to Him and made partakers of His Life. This is the reason why the Epistles are so full of the expression "in Christ." It means that we are in Him so as to partake of His Life for all purposes for righteousness and eternal life. This first introduction to Christ is, in a heathen man, by faith. By faith he believes that being the Son of God, Christ is capable of redeeming Him from sin and death. By faith he is grafted unto Him in the due use of the Sacrament appointed for that purpose. By faith, that is by heartily believing in Him, he continues in Him, "he stands." Faith realizes to him all the means of grace and renewal. By faith he discerns the Lord's Body in the appointed Food of the Church, and is fed by It not unto death but unto life.

It is clear, then, that the whole of Christianity as a system of Divine grace is, according to St. Paul, in the domain of faith. It is in fact "the faith."

Now let us pause here. It does seem strange that there should be such anxiety to reconcile the statement of one Apostle, "So you see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only," with the statement of another, "We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law," seeing that St. Paul repudiates justification by the law because his whole heart is set upon men receiving union with a Divine Person in order that they may keep the law, not in the letter but in the spirit – which spirit includes the letter and a vast deal more. Justification is a state which has a beginning and a continuance. The beginning is being brought into and under Christ, and this by faith. A man cannot be brought into it by the law simply, because the law is ten bare and isolated commands, which carry no life along with them, and which speak not a word respecting Christ; neither can obedience to these be counted as justification, if justification be the life of Christ within us. It must be something very very much more than not killing, not committing adultery, and not stealing.

When then St. James says, "By works a man is justified, and not by faith only," he says what St. Paul says, "That which avails is faith, working by love" (2), that if it was the highest degree of faith and had along with it not charity, it would profit nothing (4), that they who have it must labour that they may be accepted of Christ (7), that if they think they are Christ's it will be of no avail except they crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts (8); that they must work out their salvation with fear and trembling (9); that they must press towards the

mark for the prize of the high calling God (10); that they must obey the Gospel (11); that they must keep a good conscience (12); that they must labour to enter into the rest that remaineth to the people of God (17). St. James must by works mean all these, for every line of his Epistle shows that he takes not the lowest but the highest view of Christian duty; and that St. Paul means all these as requisites of salvation is plain, because he says so. In order to see the absurdity of the contrary we have only to consider what St. Paul would say if someone were to say to him, "Oh, holy Apostle, when thou writest that we are justified by faith, apart from the deeds of the law, dost thou not mean that we are justified without repentance, without love, without running with all our might, without bringing our bodies into subjection, without labouring, without working out our salvation?" What would he say? He would say, "Read my Epistles, and see if I have given any such a view of my Master's religion."

But if after all there be this antagonism, what does it show? What is its lesson? Evidently this, that we, if we are Christian teachers, must express ourselves sometimes according to the teaching of one Apostle in one of his statements, sometimes of another in one of his. We must not be in bondage to any system of faith and works which was unknown till the time of the Reformation, and which has done infinite harm by shutting the mouths of Christian teachers in the matter of the reproduction of some of the plainest words of our Saviour Christ; for it is to be remembered that it is not St. James alone who speaks of works saving men. There is One Who says: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." "Watch ye therefore, and pray always that ye may be accounted worthy to escape those things which shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." "Come, ye blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungred and ye gave me meat," &c. (Matth. v. 7, 9; vi. 14, 15; xii. 87; xxv. 84).

Now these words of Christ were uttered by Him without any reservations, and we, at times at least, must do the same. We must not constantly be bringing forward qualifications to make them perfectly agree with our notions of the Pauline doctrine, which notions of ours are founded on neglect of very much which that great servant of Christ wrote. By so doing, we take off all their edge from these words of Christ, we deprive them of their very life. Christ is our righteousness, and if He gave forth these utterances without fear that they would interfere with the doctrine of His merits [that is, the infinite worth of his finished work], so must we.

Anyhow, both St. Paul and St. James teach us that justification can never be known except by its fruits, and that the fruits of justification are not

ornamental but necessary. They are not the adornment of a profession, but the requirements of Almighty God for our salvation.

There is, it seems to me, no absolutely certain reconciliation between Rom. iii. 28 and James ii. 24, because we cannot pronounce absolutely whether either Apostle alludes to the same faith or the same works as the other. As regards faith, St. Paul says, we are justified "if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom. iv. 24). This is in accordance with St. Paul's view that justification is justification of life, and so the Divine Object of it is God the Father renewing Life to the Lord Jesus. St. James, on the contrary, fixes it upon the unity of God. It seems difficult to believe that both Apostles take the same view of the Object of justifying faith. Again, with respect to works, we might suppose, from his allusion to works in chap. ii. 11, that St. James means by them obedience to the Ten Commandments; but the two cases of works which he cites, Abraham's and Rahab's, are in no sense works of the law—one of them is the highest conceivable work of faith.

For the impossibility of separating from one another the various internal graces or affections which conduce to salvation, see my notes on Luke vii. 48-49. I wrote these respecting the acceptance by the Lord of the woman who was a sinner, for it seemed to me the height of folly and presumption to try to separate or keep asunder the will, the repentance, the faith, the hope, the love, and assign to each its separate part in the matter of salvation. God hath joined them all together, let us not try, even in thought, to put them asunder.