

What Does James Mean About Faith and Works (James 2:4-16)?

James' view of faith and works has caused much confusion within Christendom and throughout Church history. It seems to be in direct conflict with Paul's confession of salvation by Grace alone without any type of works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Although Luther called James' epistle "*an epistle of straw*," we must remember that this epistle is part of the Word of God; a valid, canonical book.

Many people automatically assume that this epistle was authored by the Apostle James, the son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve. This, however, is not true. The Apostle James had been killed by Herod Agrippa 1, grandson of Herod the Great (Acts 12:1-2) in 44 A.D. James' epistle was, instead, written by James the Just, a half-brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19) sometime around 45-50 A.D. It is believed to be one of the earliest written New Testament books, as it indicates no understanding of Paul's gospel or Paul's other doctrines. This fact is confirmed by Luke's account of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

Another misconception among many Christians is that the Apostles preached to the Gentile nation. They did not; they ministered only to the Jews. The participants of the Jerusalem Council (51 A.D.) agreed to continue in this manner, with Peter and those under him ministering to the Jews, while Paul would minister to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7-9). A quick glance at James' introduction will confirm that his letter was written to the Jewish nation (James 1:1).

As stated earlier, James' and Paul's interpretation of faith and works oppose each other. Paul tells us that salvation is by faith alone and not by works, while James insist that faith is dead without works. Trying to harmonize these two outlooks can not be accomplished without twisting Scripture. Both statements are true. How is this, then, possible?

Paul's statements about Salvation was straightforward and to the point, however, salvation during the Old Testament period is cloudy and somewhat murky. There are no clear definitions of the gospel or salvation in the Old Testament. What is clear is that salvation during the Old Testament involved both faith and works. Old Testament believers were saved by their faith, but works were still involved. Salvation by faith alone was unknown to the Jews.

Animal sacrifices during this time provided a temporary propitiation, or satisfaction, to sin. The Jews of this time had no idea that these sacrifices pointed to something greater; the death of the Messiah, which would solve the problem of sin and death once and for all.

The Law of Moses (Mosaic Law) required animal sacrifices. It was a work. But one had to believe, or have faith, that it would cover your sin. In other words, forgiveness required a work (the animal sacrifice) and faith (believing the sacrifice covered the sin).

This teaching of faith and works continue in the Gospels and during Jesus' ministry here on earth. For example, when a man asked what must be done to obtain eternal life, Jesus' reply was to keep the commandments, which is a work. When told that he does keep the commandments, Jesus then tells the man to go and sell all his possessions and give it to the poor, which is another type of work (cf. Matthew 19:16-26; Luke 18:18-30). In another place of Scripture, a sick man is lowered down from the ceiling due

to the large crowd in order for Jesus to heal him. Seeing this, Jesus tells the man that, because of his faith, his sins are forgiven (Luke 5:17-24). Jesus taught both faith and works.

In the Jewish economy, both faith and works were required for salvation. John the Baptist proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 3:1-2). In this gospel, water baptism – a work – was required for salvation (cf. Mark 1:4; Mark 16:15-16; John 3:4-5; Acts 2:36-38; Acts 22:12-16).

The gospel of the kingdom focused on who Jesus was; the Messiah, the Son of God. However a new gospel was revealed to Paul by the Lord Jesus Himself (Galatians 1:11-12). This new message of salvation did not focus on the identity of Christ but upon the work of Christ – that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). This was known as the “gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). This was a secret that was kept from the Jews and was only revealed to the Apostle Paul (cf. Romans 2:16, 16:25; 1 Corinthians 9:17; 1 Timothy 1:11).

No works are involved in Paul’s gospel: no keeping of the Mosaic Law, no water baptism, no circumcision, no nothing. Salvation is by pure grace alone.

The leaders of the Jerusalem church did not receive Paul’s gospel with a whole lot of dignity. And why should they? It was contrary to what the Jewish people had been practicing for the past 1,500 years, and God had not told them to stop. These leaders were going as far as telling Paul’s converts that they were not saved; that Paul’s teaching of salvation by grace alone was not sufficient. They not only needed to believe, but also be circumcised, keeping the Mosaic Law (cf. Acts 15:1-5).

Paul went to Jerusalem by revelation (Galatians 2:2), a direct order from the risen Lord (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:6; 2 Corinthians 12:1, 7; Galatians 1:12, 2:2; Ephesians 3:3), where he presented this new gospel to the leaders, i.e., James, Peter and John (Galatians 2:2, 9). Many throughout Christendom erroneously believe that Peter and Paul proclaimed the same gospel. If this was so, why then would Paul have to go into Jerusalem in order to communicate this new gospel? Would they not have known it? The reason behind the controversy in the Council of Jerusalem is because Paul preached a different gospel from that of the Jews. This was confirmed by Paul’s statement of Galatians 2:7 concerning the “gospel of the circumcision” (Peter) and the “gospel of the uncircumcision” (Paul).

Both Peter and Paul received their gospels directly from the Lord. Peter received the gospel of the kingdom from the Lord’s earthly ministry, while Paul received his gospel of the grace of God from the risen Lord. Both gospels were valid. After much arguing during the Council of Jerusalem, Peter finally agreed with Paul (Acts 15:7-11).

With Peter siding with Paul, the two gospel administration was ended. From then on, it was Paul’s gospel or nothing (Acts 15:11). One could be saved only through Paul’s gospel.

When James wrote his epistle, it was before the events in Acts 15. James knew nothing about Paul’s secrets, the gospel of the grace of God. He only knew the Old Testament prophetic program, the gospel of the kingdom and the Mosaic Law. James’ purpose of his letter was to encourage Jews to endure trials

with faith and wisdom which would result in joy (James 1.2–5), following what had been taught throughout the Old Testament.

No one had told him, or the other Twelve, that the Mosaic Law had ended, or to stop proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. He had not been told that belief in the finished works of Christ was now sufficient for salvation. It was not until the Council of Jerusalem that this new gospel was discussed and finally resolved by Peter taking sides with Paul.

In James' epistle, we do not find any of Paul's doctrines. We see nothing about grace, faith, the resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, etc., because James knew nothing of these. It was only after Paul began teaching these doctrines that the Twelve would understand. They were Pauline revelations, given to him by the ascended, glorified Lord. The book of James is more of an Old Testament book than New because when he wrote it, he was still operating under the Mosaic Law.

In the Old Testament, salvation involved both faith and works, and James wrote from that perspective. The gospel of the grace of God, which requires faith alone for salvation, was kept secret from him and the Twelve, and only revealed to Paul. Both James and Paul were correct, but each must be understood in their own proper context and timeframe.

Acts is a transitional book. It documents the transition from the gospel of the kingdom to the gospel of the grace of God. It explains why the kingdom of God did not come unto Israel and why God saved Paul to be the apostle of the Gentiles. For a short time, both programs were being preached and taught, and both were valid. However, at the conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem, only one gospel remained.

The good news is God is not finished with the nation of Israel. When the church is complete, or as Paul described as "the fullness of the Gentiles" (Romans 11:25), God will restart the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 24:14), but for now, believers are to go to Paul for their doctrine. Paul's teachings are Scripture, on par with Moses and the other prophets. To reject these teaching is to warrant God's condemnation. To reject Paul's letters is to reject the revelation that the Lord Jesus Christ gave to Paul when He commissioned him as the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13), the founder of the Church, the body of Christ.