

Romans versus James: A Contradiction in Scripture?

The great religious reformer, Martin Luther, actually wanted to remove the book of James from the New Testament! Apparently he, like many who have lived after him, see a contradiction between the apostle Paul and James. After all, Paul writes that “If Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God.” Then quoting from Genesis 15:6, Paul writes, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” (Romans 4:2-3) However, James writes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works...?” (James 2: 21) Hopefully, the following notes will help us realize that there is no contradiction.

First, we should notice that neither writer tries to exclude faith or “works.” Notice that the New Testament book which deals with grace perhaps more than any other book (namely, Romans) also speaks of obedience and godly living. (Chapter 6; chapter 12, etc.) By the same token, the New Testament book that emphasizes the role of our obedience and works (namely, James) also speaks of the importance of maintaining a sincere and confident faith. (Chapter 1:6-8; chapter 2; etc.)

Second, we need to understand how the terms “faith” and “works” are being used, and understand the point of the respective passages. Paul, in Romans 4, for example, is clearly discussing *the basis for justification*. (4:2 “If Abraham was justified by works...”) That basis cannot be works, for all are condemned as sinners; our works are not perfect.

But James is not discussing the basis for justification. Rather, he is talking about whether faith is dead or alive. Notice that James says, “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (2:20) and “faith without works is dead.” (2:26) A key to understanding the different writers’ perspectives is found in James 2:19: “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe – and tremble!” As W.E. Vine says in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*,

The two writers use the words ‘faith’ and ‘works’ in somewhat different senses. With Paul, faith is acceptance of God’s word; with James, it is acceptance of the truth of certain statements about God (v. 19), which may fail to affect one’s conduct. Faith, as dealt with by Paul, results in acceptance with God, i.e., justification, and is bound to manifest itself. ... With Paul, works are dead works; with James they are life works. The works of which Paul speaks could be quite independent of faith; those referred to by James can be wrought only where faith is real, and they will attest its reality.

So with righteousness, or justification: Paul is occupied with a right relationship with God; James, with right conduct....

Third, we should recognize that, as Vine again says, “The two writers have before them different epochs in Abraham’s life – Paul, the event recorded in Gen. 15, James, that in Gen. 22.” Genesis 15 was when God promised that Abraham would have descendents as numerous as the stars, before Abraham even had a son. Verse 6 says Abraham “believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” Genesis 22 was after Abraham had had Isaac, and was told to offer him on the altar. When Abraham did according to God’s word, God said, “...Now I know that you fear God.” (22:12) Clearly, God “knew” this before, when He called Abraham out of his country and made the promises to Abraham in Genesis 11:31 – 12:3. But Abraham’s works, as James argues, *perfected* or completed his faith. And God repeated the promises to Abraham in 22:15-18, explaining, “...because you have obeyed My voice.”