

Faith Without Works

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Every single word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph written in God's Word, the Holy Bible, is important. However, if a matter is *very* important, God has it repeated. If it is very, *very* important, God has it repeated *twice*. Such is the case with the doctrine of the necessity of Christian works and faith, here written by God through His apostle James in chapter two of James' epistle.

Clearly then, it is very, *very* important that we understand that faith without works is dead. But along comes another apostle—Paul, in his letter to God's church at Ephesus—and just look at what he has to say:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Some compare these two passages and declare, "The Bible contradicts itself, so how can it be the inspired Word of God?" They then use this and other perceived contradictions as excuses to discard completely the whole written Word of God. Others take the path of least resistance. Adopting Paul's words, but completely ignoring God's instruction through James, they claim, "All you need is grace and faith. Works are not necessary!"

Is there a contradiction? Do we or do we not need works? And just what are "works" anyway?

We need to answer these questions because they are vital to our salvation. True, spiritual understanding of Ephesians 2:8-9 and James 2:14-26 reveals that the Bible does *not* contradict itself on this subject of faith and works—nor anywhere else, for that matter.

Some Definitions

When we first turn to Ephesians 2:8-9, the first thing we notice is that we are confronted with a whole list of spiritual-sounding words: *grace, saved, faith, gift, works*. Even those of us who have been in God's church for many years and who may clearly understand each of these words individually, are slowed down in our comprehension of these verses when faced with so many such terms presented one after the other.

So let us take a very brief Greek lesson. Please take the time to study these words in more detail. Here are the key terms contained in this scripture in English and Greek from the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, and, to make the meanings clearer, other English terms translated in the New Testament from the same Greek words:

- **Grace:** *charis (khar'-ece)*. Also translated as *favour, thanks, thank, pleasure*.
- **Saved:** *sozo (sode'-zo)*. Also translated as *make whole, heal, be whole*.
- **Faith:** *pistis*. Also translated as *assurance, believe, belief, those who believe, fidelity*.
- **Gift:** *doron*. Also translated as *present, offering*.
- **Works:** *ergon*. Also translated as *deed, doing, labor*.

Inconsistent Stance

We have just learned that *ergon* is the original Greek for the English word "works." It does not appear to be a very difficult, ambiguous, or confusing term. But what do the many people and churches who claim that works are not required perceive "works" to be?

Opinions vary. One group perceives *works* to mean the whole law in general. A second group perceives *works* as specific portions of God's law, which they look upon as being "Jewish" or "Old Covenant," or that they are just not willing to keep and teach. A third group, amazingly enough in their rejection of it, perceives this term as meaning works of charity in general!

Individuals or groups who choose to substitute the word "law" for the word "works" in Ephesians 2:8-9, and who thus say that New Testament Christians do not have to keep God's law, do not appear to mean it totally and literally. Instead, most of them reserve the right to choose which parts of the law they wish to keep ("You shall not kill," "You shall not steal," etc.) and those that they do not wish to keep ("Remember the Sabbath," holy days, tithing, clean and unclean meats, etc.). God has nowhere given authority to His people to be selective in these matters, thus this stance toward the law is inconsistent and even hypocritical.

Conditions for Salvation

The church of God has always agreed one hundred percent with those who say that salvation is a gift, and that a Christian cannot earn salvation by charitable works or by obedience to God's law. However, obedience is a condition we must meet before God will give us His free gift of salvation. New Testament evidence is overwhelming on this matter. Here are just a few verses:

And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit, which God has given to those who obey him. (Acts 5:32)

He who says, "I know him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (I John 2:4)

So He said to him [*a rich, young ruler*], "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." (Matthew 19:17)

If you love Me, keep My commandments. (John 14:15)

The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2:8-9, does *not* say that works are not required. The purpose of his statement is to show that works do not save us, but that grace and faith do! In fact, the very next verse, verse 10, shows that God calls members of His church for the very purpose of performing good works:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10).

The apostle's language is very clear. God desires us to walk in good works, and He has prepared our spiritual education process so that we will learn to do them. Doing good works in the name of Jesus Christ is a major part of the purpose for the life of each true Christian. We cannot truly be Christians without them!

No Contradiction

Finally, is there any contradiction between the opinions of Paul and James on this matter?

Simply, no! Paul, in Ephesians 2:8 says that faith is required and, as we have seen, in verse 10, says that good works are also required. James, in the second chapter of his epistle, says that faith and works are inseparable:

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (Verse 17)

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? (Verse 20)

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (Verse 26)

In his *Bible Handbook*, Henry H. Halley states that:

Paul's doctrine of Justification by Faith, and James' doctrine of Justification by Works, are supplementary, not contradictory. Neither was opposing the teaching of the other—they were devoted friends and co-workers. James fully endorsed Paul's work (Acts 15:13-29; 21:17-26).

Paul preached Faith as the basis of justification before God, but insisted that it must issue in the right kind of Life. James was writing to those who had accepted the doctrine of Justification by Faith but were not Living Right, telling them that such Faith was No Faith at all. (Halley's Bible Handbook; page 659; capitalization as in original)

The Revised Standard Version translates James 2:20 in this very interesting and appropriate way:

Do you want to be shown, you shallow man, that faith apart from works is barren?

It is the word *barren* that is so intriguing. In the Bible, several women—for example, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth—could not have children. In the physical realm, a fertile male and a fertile female are both required conditions for reproduction for most forms of life. Spiritually, active faith and active works are both required conditions to produce fruit and to reproduce godly, spiritual life in us. In both cases, life, whether spiritual or physical, is a gift of God, the Creator and Life-giver. If either condition is absent or inactive, barrenness or lack of new life results.

Another meaning of *barren* common in English is that of a land without vegetation, a desolate place. The Greek word James uses in verse 20 is *argos* (instead of *nekra*, "dead," as in verses 17 and 26), meaning "lazy," "unproductive," "unprofitable," "idle," "ineffective." Its literal meaning is "no work" [*a* (negative) + *ergon* (work)]! The word picture that develops is of an area of land that receives plenty of sunshine but too little rain, and hence, it is barren, desolate. Such a land cannot be worked because it will not produce anything profitable. In the same way, a person having only faith will produce nothing profitable; he needs a steady "rain" of work to grow and mature.

So there is no contradiction. Faith is required. Works are required. Works toward God are to do His will and His work and, yes, to obey His laws. Works toward our neighbors are to serve them and to do good for them. Doing them promotes growth of godly character and provides a shining example of true Christian living.

Faith without works is dead.

Faith *with* works is life.

Eternal life!

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