

FAITH AND WORKS

This Reflection seeks to clarify what sometimes is viewed as a contrast or even a contradiction in the writings of the Apostles Paul and James on a vital subject: in fact, it is so important that some name it "one of the thorniest problems" in the Bible, as we may see shortly.

First, the Apostle Paul:

Romans 3:21–28 *But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. [NRSV]*

The exclusive foundation of faith is crystal clear: ²²righteousness of God through faith; ²⁴grace as a gift; ²⁵effective through faith; ²⁶justifies the one who has faith in Jesus; ²⁸justified by faith apart from works.

This is not just the Apostle Paul: in fact, in the following chapter Paul confirms his teaching by relating the much earlier statement of God to Abraham:

Genesis 15:5–6 *And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. ⁶And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness. [KJV]*

The righteousness of Abraham was in that he believed in the Lord.

Then the Apostle James wrote:

James 2:14–17 *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. [NRSV]*

So can faith (or belief) alone save me? A few sentences later, also after recalling Abraham, there is more to emphasize the point:

James 2:24 *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. [NRSV]*

So, who is right here: Paul or James? This is a matter, which has divided theologians for centuries or, actually millennia and it is an important one, because the next question is: how much work is necessary to be justified and thus "saved"? Feed how many hungry ones and clothe how many naked ones?

This is nothing new: the Lord loved to confuse theoreticians, logicians and theologians, as when His disciples ate without first washing their hands, as we read in the Gospel of the Apostle Mark (**Mark 7:1–13**).

And one may also remember the "contradiction" pointed out by Jesus to the Pharisees, the theologians of His day:

Matthew 22:41–45 *Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, ⁴²saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴"The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"? ⁴⁵If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" [ESV]*

On the contrary, not only there is no "contradiction" between Paul and James, there is a powerful confirmation and actually the sequence of the writings in the New Testament is very helpful: first, Paul set the foundation

of faith (without which all would be lost); then James confirmed the foundation of faith and explained that faith is not an abstract intellectual ideology (or a “religious” construct), but a very practical and “real” matter, which (if it exists) naturally manifests itself in our lives through actions (that is “works”).

If it does not manifest itself through actions it does not exist (“is dead”):

James 2:17 *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. [NRSV]*

“works” are a test: do I have faith? If I do, there must be some action resulting from it.

In fact, James also affirms that faith is foundational, in his assessment of Abraham:

James 2:23 *Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. [NRSV]*

Abraham’s righteousness is established because first, he “believed God” and then proceeded to act on his belief.

That faith is the foundation for James is also revisited in this famous passage:

James 4:13–16 *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—¹⁴yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. [ESV]*

It is not our planning that matters; rather it is what the Lord “wills.”

In conclusion:

First, faith is the foundation (Paul); but let us not be confused: it is faith — not in a doctrine, or in any theology, or philosophy or any law — but in the One and Only Living God and His Son: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, James alerts us that we can check to know if, in fact, we do have any faith and what kind of faith we have, by explaining that such faith in the Lord cannot but manifest itself in actions and his epistle gives many examples:

James 1:22 *But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. [NLT]*

Finally and just for the record, the Lord Jesus Himself — at the end of the Sermon on the Mount — summarized all this, which we have been considering, very concisely:

Matthew 7:21 *“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.” [NASB]*

Thus the works that matter are not those performed to satisfy a set of rules or laws or liturgy, but those that do the will of Jesus’ Father.

As a footnote, we may remember that Paul specified that it is the works prescribed by the law, which do not produce justification:

Romans 3:28 *For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. [NRSV]*

Following up on the Sermon on the Mount: if I want to do the will of the Father I must know what His will is and, in order to know what His will is, I must know the Father, and to know the Father, I must know, believe and trust the Lord Jesus Christ: there is no other way, as Jesus explained to Thomas, the night before He was arrested.

John 14:6 *Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. The only way to the Father is through me.” [EXB]*

Once again, there is no contradiction in the scriptures, which are thoroughly self-consistent: it is not the saying, but it is the doing that matters. Of course, such doing is only possible if it is founded on faith and knowledge of the Lord’s will.