

**The Relationship Between Faith and Works  
in James and Paul**

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Anyone reading through the New Testament may notice statements like the following found in a number of Pauline letters: “A person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (Rom 3:28) or “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16). But in reaching the book of James one may read, “A person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24) or “so faith without works is also dead” (James 2:26). How are these statements to be reconciled with one another? Do Paul and James contradict one another? It may appear to the casual reader that Paul and James have different views about faith and works, but it will be explained here that this is not the case. The fact is that Paul and James have very similar views about salvation and subsequently how to live as a Christian.

Paul argues strongly in many of his letters that the way to become a Christian is by faith in the finished work of Christ, not by doing works of the Jewish Law, including neither circumcision, nor following dietary regulations, nor observing certain holy days. (Cf. Rom 3:27-28; 4:3-5; 9:32; Gal 2:16; 3:6-29). Paul’s arguments in these passages are very clear and unambiguous; a person is justified by faith in Christ alone, not by performing the works of the Law. Paul is talking about what makes a person a Christian, how a person initially becomes a Christian, not about how a Christian should live.

James on the other hand was not describing how a person becomes a Christian, but mainly telling about how to subsequently live as a Christian. He is not arguing for ‘justification by works’ as opposed to ‘by faith’. Rather he is concerned about how a person’s faith affects their actions. When talking about the relationship between faith and works, he does not use the term, ‘works of the Law’, as Paul does. He does not seem to be talking about being justified by keeping the Old Testament rules and regulations. Rather he is saying that if a person really does have faith, then it should be evidenced by his actions. He makes this clear in the midst of his argument by saying, “I by my works will show you my faith” (Jam 2:18).

In discussing these same kinds of issues, Paul also talks at length about how a person is to live once they have been initially justified by faith and have entered into this relationship with Christ and his church. Like James, Paul definitely believes that salvation should have a transforming effect on a person’s life, and that good works will be a normal and necessary part of a believer’s life. He states that a believer should no longer live in sin (Rom 6:1-18), but rather should seek to please the Lord in everything (2 Cor 5:9-10). In a number of places Paul gives lists of vices that should be avoided and virtues that should be a believer’s normal way of life. (Cf. Gal 5:19-23; Titus 3:1-3). In fact he says in Ephesians 2:10 that as Christians we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life”. He furthermore firmly instructs in Titus 3:8 that “those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.” In this regard, both Paul and James are making the same kinds of statements that a person’s faith is confirmed by their works.

Furthermore, both James and Paul make very similar statements when it comes to someone claiming to have faith and yet not showing this by their good works. In arguing the point that someone’s alleged faith must be confirmed by real actions, James says, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe-- and shudder” (Jam 2:19). In a very similar argument, insisting that a person’s actions will confirm whether someone’s declared faith is true or not, Paul says, “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions” (Titus 1:16). Both Paul and James argue that good works should be the natural outcome of a person’s faith and indeed confirm that his faith is genuine.