

Justification by Faith

by

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Many have been confused by the differences between justification as presented in Romans 4:1-3 and justification as presented in James 2:21-24. These two passages appear to contradict one another until one understands certain truths.

The Passages Quoted

Romans 4:1-3

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”¹

James 2:21-24

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

At first glance these two passages do indeed seem to contradict one another. Was Abraham justified by faith or by works? Or was he justified by a combination of faith and works, as James is sometimes taken to mean?

The answer to these questions involves some simple, yet often overlooked, methodology.

Well, That’s Your Interpretation!

Has anyone ever confronted you with the above statement when you have told them something that you believed the Bible teaches? The implication of the statement is clear. There are several possible interpretations, and your interpretation isn’t really correct. Maybe there is no correct interpretation. After all, doesn’t everyone have the right to their own interpretation?

Actually, and most definitely, NO! A person who approaches the Bible has no right to his own interpretation! He has the responsibility to determine, as best as can be determined, the meaning of the original author of the biblical statement. This is called by theologians “authorial intent.” What did the original human author, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, really intend the statement to mean? Are there any principles that can be applied to the text to determine the meaning the author intended? The answer to this last question is actually, and most definitely, YES!

First, we must, if possible, determine who the author of the statement was, and identify the original recipient or recipients of the statement. This will help us understand their view point, especially as we study other sources concerning both parties.

Second, we must, if possible, determine when the writing was originally penned. It is an axiom of theology that 1) revelation is progressive and new meanings are sometimes applied to old words, and 2) any given word, phrase, etc. found in a literary body may mean one thing in one context and a different thing in a different context. That is why the word “house” means a different thing when we talk about “The White House” or “The House of Representatives” or “The House of Windsor” or “My house” or “I’m in the dog house.” Most words found in a dictionary have several meanings attached. Sometimes those meanings are close, and other times they are quite distinct. It is important to decide which meaning the author of a specific statement had in mind.

Third, we must use normal grammatical, historical, and cultural information when determining the meaning of a text. When a person says that he believes the Bible is the “Word of God” he may not realize that he is saying that the Bible is God’s Word in the sense of being God’s communication to man. God used normal language principles in expressing truth to the original recipients of that message. To

¹ All Bible quotes are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

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allegorize or spiritualize the language of passage is to ignore the communicative value of that passage. When one ignores the meaning of the passage in that way, he has no hope of understanding God's message.

The Application of Interpretive Principles

The Authors and Recipients

It is obvious that the two passages we are considering were written by two different human authors, Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, and James in the Epistle of James. Also they wrote to two different groups, Paul to Gentile Christians who needed a strong doctrinal presentation of truth, and James to Jewish believers who needed encouragement in difficult times. These individuals occupied different positions in the early church (Body of Christ). James was a chief leader in the assembly of Christians in Jerusalem. These early Jewish believers had not, at the time of writing, been presented with the grace provisions for Christian livings. Not only that, but they had a decidedly Old Testament view of how to live right. So we see that the recipients of the two epistles were distinct.

At the time that James wrote, early in the current age, the church was still primarily Jewish, grace principles for daily living were not yet well known. The Jews were still living primarily as members of the household of Israel. It was not until Paul's message of grace, and the removal of the spiritual distinction between Jew and Gentile was made known that Jews began to realize that a new program had begun. The book of The Acts of the Apostles chronicles the transition from a purely Jewish church to a unified Jewish-Gentile body.

While James wrote his epistle early in the transition, Paul wrote sometime later. By the time Paul wrote, the new revelation concerning grace living had been revealed to him, and the older means of law keeping had been superseded. But at the time James wrote, this was not yet known, especially in Jewish circles.

The Meanings of "Justification"

Daily Justification

A careful inductive grammatical, historical study of the word "justification" and its associated verb "justify" reveals that the words had two somewhat different uses at the time of the New Testament was written. Both Paul and James use the words with both meanings.

The older Jewish meaning of the words had to do with the righteous lifestyle. We will call this "daily justification." A person was justified when he lived a lifestyle that was honoring to God. It viewed justification from man's perspective, rather than from God's. It included abstaining from wrong practices, and doing good works. At the time of the writing of the New Testament the Jewish idea of this type of justification was symbolized by the individual male getting circumcised. It is this meaning of the term that Paul meant in Galatians 5:1-6:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

Attempting to be justified by law in this passage has nothing to do with salvation. The Galatians (Gentile Christians) were being told that they were to live the Christian life by keeping the law. Their daily justification before men was predicated, they were told, on principles of keeping the Mosaic law, and they were being taught by "Judaizers" that they should be circumcised. These Judaizers believed in this kind of justification by works. Lest we be unfair to those who taught circumcision based justification, we must remember that under the law this kind of justification by works was mandated and legitimate. It was never designed to get a lost person justified before God in the initial salvation/justification sense, but it was designed to cause a believer to live according to a particular set of legal principles. However, the

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change to the grace method of daily justification was rejected by the Judaizers to the point where they persecuted Paul when he presented the truth of the new grace method of pleasing God before men in their daily lives.

Daily justification is also the meaning of the words in James 2:21-24. James is not teaching “salvation by works” but daily justification by keeping the law. At the time that he wrote, early in the transition, this was still the legitimate method of living for Jewish Christians. This legal method being changed by new revelation given to Paul, but at the time James wrote Paul had not yet written his first epistle. The newly revealed daily justification by faith had not yet been dispensed by Paul.

Forensic Justification

Another meaning for the words “justification” and “justify” are related to the concept of spiritual salvation. They have to do with the way God views each individual on earth, either as justified or not. This use does not imply a particular kind of lifestyle, but is forensic, because it is a declaration by God in His court that the penalties associated with unrighteousness have been paid. When Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith, this is what he means. He does not mean that Abraham lived a just lifestyle, but rather that God “imputed” righteousness to Abraham apart from any works, based strictly on what Abraham believed. While it is true that Abraham did not believe in the work of Christ, which would not occur for many centuries, it is the work of Christ, applied backward in time, that God, in His infinite wisdom, applied to Abraham when he believed God. This is the teaching of Romans 4. Abraham was saved in the forensic justification sense by faith, just as people today are saved by faith. It was not the content of what Abraham believed that justified him,² simply the belief itself.

James is not referring to forensic justification when he says in verses 21 and 22, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” James was “made perfect” not forensically, but actually, by his good works, and was therefore justified by works.

Conclusion

James recognizes that at the time of his writing both forms of justification were necessary. He says in verses 23 and 24, “And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*’ And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” This dual use of the word is made clear in vs. 24 where James shows Abraham was justified in two ways, not only by faith, but also by works.

By the time Paul came along, both daily and forensic justification were by faith, *but not at the time that James wrote*. The simple recognition of the dual meaning of the words “justification” and “justify” show that Paul and James do not contradict one another. Forensic justification has always been by faith. But daily justification changed from a works based function, to a faith based function when the Apostle Paul began to proclaim the gospel of sanctification by faith.

By applying simple rules of interpretation, the student of Scripture can easily distinguish between the two meanings of one word, and avoid the confusion of salvation by works for Abraham, and salvation by grace through faith today.

² In the context of Genesis 15 it is clear that Abraham believed an impossible thing, and God counted him righteous, that is, He imputed Abraham’s faith to Abraham for righteousness. What did Abraham believe? Simply that he was to bear a child from his own loins when he was well past child bearing age, and Sarah, his wife, was unable to conceive children. Because of his act of faith, God forensically justified Abraham. The theological *basis* for that justification was the future death and resurrection of Christ, but the *means* of the justification was Abraham’s belief in God’s statement that he would have a male heir.