

Are we saved by faith or by faith and works? Doesn't James contradict Paul?

Q: James 2:14-26 seems to contradict the doctrine of justification by faith that is taught elsewhere in the Bible (such as Romans 3:28). Can you explain the seeming contradiction? A: You are absolutely correct! James 2 does "seem" to contradict what Paul teaches. Both James and Paul (in Romans 4) start with Abraham, yet seem to arrive at completely different conclusions about how we are made right. Paul says we are justified by faith alone and James seems to say we are justified by faith and works (2:21,24)!

However, the contradiction is really only a verbal one (logic calls this a "verbal fallacy"). James and Paul are both using the same words: faith and justification, but with different meanings.

"Faith" in James means "mental assent; an intellectual belief in the existence of God." You can see this in verses 14, 17, 19. The faith that James talks about is a faith that even the demons can have! James was the leader of the Messianic church in Jerusalem and so he uses terms in the same way the non-Messianic Jews in Jerusalem do. The Pharisees and rabbis in Jerusalem spoke of the assertion of monotheism and the mere intellectual assent to orthodox teaching as "having faith." Does this kind of faith save people? NO! And Paul would have agreed. Intellectual faith does NOT save anyone.

The kind of "faith", Paul talks about is "absolute trust; total dependence on God; being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Romans 4:5,18,21). This is more than just intellectual faith! The difference between James' "faith" and Paul's use of the word is the difference between believing a parachute could save you if you jumped out of a plane (James) and actually jumping out of a plane and pulling the ripcord (Paul).

"Justified" is the other word that is being used differently. Paul is talking about being justified in God's sight (Romans 5:1). James is talking about being justified before men (James 2:18). "Don't tell me that you have faith, show me!" James says.

James gives the example of Abraham's offering of Isaac (Genesis 22). He says this action by Abraham was proof before men of Abraham's righteousness: "Was not Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" (James 2:21). But James is quick to add that Abraham was made righteous before God some 30 years prior to this event: "Abraham believed God and his faith

was credited to him as righteousness" (James 2:23; Genesis 15:6).

There is no contradiction between Paul and James when you realize that the one is talking about justification before God and one is talking about justification before men.