

## *Faith and Works: Squaring the Circle*

**P.G. Nelson**

On what basis does God justify a person: faith in Christ or good works? This is a central question for Christian theology, but unfortunately, it is one that has divided Christians from the beginning. The Council of Jerusalem was called because some Jewish Christians taught that, for Gentile Christians to be saved, they had to be circumcised and ‘keep the law of Moses’ (Acts 15:1, 5). The Reformation took place because the Roman Catholic Church taught that, for individuals to be justified, they had to do what the Church told them.

### **Paul and James**

Evangelical theologians have always maintained that God justifies a person on the basis solely of his or her faith (*sola fide*). This is, they say, the teaching of the NT, especially of Paul in his letters to the Galatians and Romans, and summarized in his letter to the Ephesians:

<sup>8</sup>For by the grace [of God] you are [in a state of] having been saved, through faith. And this [state has] not [been attained] by you, [it is] the gift of God – <sup>9</sup>not [attained] by works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are *his* handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God laid down beforehand, so that we might walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

There are some passages in the NT, however, that seem to teach justification by works, in particular the well-known passage in James 2:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>14</sup>What [is] the value, my brothers [and sisters], if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can the [said] faith save him?

<sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister be without clothes and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to such, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them what the body needs, what [is] the value? <sup>17</sup>So also ‘faith’, by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

<sup>18</sup>But someone will say [that] you [of whom I have been speaking] have faith and I have works [as if these are equivalent]. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. <sup>19</sup>You have faith that God is one: you do well – even the demons have [this] faith, and shudder!

<sup>20</sup>But do you want to know, O foolish person, that ‘faith’ apart from ‘works’ is useless? <sup>21</sup>Was not our father Abraham justified by works in offering up his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that his faith was working together with his works, and his faith was perfected by his works – <sup>23</sup>and the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘And Abraham had faith in God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness’, and he was called ‘friend of God’.

<sup>24</sup>You [all] see that a person is justified by works, and not by faith only.

<sup>25</sup>And likewise, was not also the prostitute Rahab justified by works in taking in the messengers and sending [them] out by another way? <sup>26</sup>For just as the body apart from [the] spirit is dead, so also ‘faith’ apart from works is dead. (Jas. 2:14–26)

Paul discusses the example of Abraham in Romans 4. What he says is somewhat different:

---

<sup>1</sup> I have translated *pisteuō* ‘have faith’ to bring out its relationship with *pistis*.

<sup>1</sup>What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has a boast; but not with God. <sup>3</sup>For what says the scripture? ‘And Abraham had faith in God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.’

<sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, the reward is not reckoned according to grace but according to debt; but to the one who does not work, <sup>5</sup>but rests [his] faith on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is ‘reckoned for righteousness’ – <sup>6</sup>just as also David pronounces the blessing of the person to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup>Blessed [are they] whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered over; <sup>8</sup>blessed [is the] man whose sin [the] Lord will by no means reckon [against him].’ (Rom. 4:1–8)

What are we to make of Paul’s and James’ teaching? Is what they say contradictory, or can it be reconciled in some way?

### Suggested answers

Some scholars take the view that Paul’s and James’ teaching is contradictory, and that one of them is correcting the other, or notions derived from the other.<sup>2</sup> Even some evangelical scholars effectively take this view, preferring Paul’s teaching to James’. Luther famously described James’ letter as ‘strawy’.<sup>3</sup>

A problem with this solution is that there are echoes of the difference between Paul and James in the teaching of Jesus. On the one hand, he effectively set faith above works in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14) and in his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). On the other hand, he effectively set works above faith in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:21–27) and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31–46). That Jesus should be able to hold these two emphases together suggests that it should be possible to reconcile Paul’s and James’ teaching in some way.

Evangelical scholars have proposed several ways of doing this. For example, Joachim Jeremias argued that Paul was thinking particularly of the beginning of the Christian life (baptism), whereas James was thinking of the Last Judgment.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning, all that is needed is faith; at the Judgment, works are needed as well. However, when Paul says in Romans 3:28 that ‘a person is justified by faith apart from works of [the] law’, he is not just thinking of the beginning of the Christian life: *dikaiousthai* is in the present continuous tense. Further, he gives no indication of there being a change in the basis of justification at the Last Judgment (see, e.g., Rom. 5:9–11).

Jeremias also argued that Paul and James use ‘faith’ and ‘works’ differently. For James faith is intellectual, for Paul it is practical. For James works are of love, for Paul they are of the Law. However, James meant more than intellectual faith in 2:5 (‘rich in faith’), and the logic of Ephesians 2:9 (‘not by works, so that no one may boast’) applies to works generally.

<sup>2</sup> See Ronald Y.K. Fung, ‘“Justification” in the Epistle of James,’ in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (World Evangelical Fellowship, 1992), 160–2; Luke Leuk Cheung, *The Genre, Composition and Hermeneutics of the Epistle of James* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 194–6.

<sup>3</sup> *Prolegomena to the New Testament* (1522).

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Jeremias, ‘Paul and James,’ *ET* 66 (1954–5), 368–71.

Other evangelical scholars have offered similar solutions. Ronald Ward suggested that Paul was thinking of the beginning of the Christian life, James of its continuance.<sup>5</sup> Leslie Mitton argued that Paul was thinking of the Christian life before the Last Judgment, whereas James was thinking of the Last Judgment.<sup>6</sup> These solutions suffer from similar problems to Jeremias’.

Other biblical scholars seek to reconcile Paul’s and James’ teaching by saying that God justifies a person on the basis of faith alone, but that faith, if it is true faith, must necessarily show itself in good works.<sup>7</sup> This is supported by Paul’s teaching in Romans 6:1–7:6, and is summarized in the formula, ‘Faith alone justifies, but not faith that is alone.’<sup>8</sup>

A problem with this explanation is that it entails taking ‘justified by works’ in James 2:21 to mean, in effect, ‘shown to be justified’.<sup>9</sup> If James had meant this, he could have said so.

There are also pastoral problems with this explanation. In the first place, there is a tendency for evangelicals to accept it as solving the problem of James 2, and then disregard it when preaching the gospel. Secondly, earnest Christians tend to take it to mean that they have to prove their faith by good deeds, and finish up effectively seeking justification by works.

Donald Verseput has suggested that the distinction between faith and works in James is between an individual’s vertical relationship with God and his or her horizontal relationship with people.<sup>10</sup> James’ argument is then that one’s service to God (faith) cannot be divorced from one’s service to others (works). However, this again encourages justification by works.

The question, then, is: is there a better way of reconciling Paul’s and James’ teaching?

### **An Alternative Solution**

A first step is to recognize that Paul and James are addressing quite different problems.<sup>11</sup> Paul is concerned about those who, like members of the circumcision party (Acts 15:1, 5), taught justification by works.<sup>12</sup> James is concerned about those who taught justification without works. The emphasis in their answers accordingly differs. Paul speaks about being saved by faith ‘for’ good works (Eph. 2:8–10),<sup>13</sup> James of being justified by faith and works ‘working together’ (Jas. 2:22).

These answers reflect the different problems Paul and James were addressing. Paul’s emphasis is appropriate for one problem (legalism), James’ for the other (antinomianism). Their two answers therefore constitute a ‘truth couplet’, like such pairs of sayings as:

<sup>5</sup> Ronald A. Ward, *NBCR*, 1228–9.

<sup>6</sup> C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1966), 103–8.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., R.V.G. Tasker, *James* (London: Tyndale, 1957), 63–71; Fung, 160–2.

<sup>8</sup> L.E. Elliott-Binns, in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley (London: Nelson, 1962), 1024.

<sup>9</sup> Tasker, 68; Fung, 161.

<sup>10</sup> Donald J. Verseput, ‘Reworking the Puzzle of Faith and Deeds in James 2:14–26,’ *NTS* 43 (1997), 97–115.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jeremias, 371; Mitton, 104; Fung, 161; Cheung, 195.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (eds.), *Justification and Variegated Nominism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck/Grand Rapids: Baker, Vol. I, 2001; Vol. II, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Paul’s reference in 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 to a man being saved in spite of his work (‘as through fire’) must be understood in its context. He is referring to *teachers* (1–10) whose teaching does not promote lasting Christian qualities (cf. 13:8–13). He does not say the same of teachers whose teaching is destructive (16–17).

Many hands make light work.  
Too many cooks spoil the broth.

Think before you leap.  
He who hesitates is lost.

At first sight, the second saying in each pair contradicts the first, but in fact they are both true when applied to the appropriate situation.

The different emphases in Jesus' teaching can be understood in the same way. In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector and his conversation with Nicodemus (a Pharisee), he was addressing legalists. In the Sermon on the Mount and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, he was addressing his disciples, and warning them against antinomian tendencies.

Abraham provides an exemplar for both Paul and James because he showed both faith alone and faith with works. He showed faith alone when, at the age of about 80, God promised him a son (Gen. 15:1–6). He showed faith with works when, many years later, he obediently offered his son as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1–18).

Truth couplets are very useful. They can express a truth more incisively than a general statement can. For example, the general truth underlying the first couplet above is:

The right number of people to perform a task is the number that will lighten the work without spoiling the result.

Faced with a family that leaves all the washing up to one member, it is less pointed to say this than, 'Many hands make light work.'

Truth couplets, however, have to be used carefully. A saying that is right for one situation will be wrong for another. Paul's teaching is appropriate for legalists but not for antinomians. James' is appropriate for antinomians but not for legalists. Ministers have to make sure that they apply the right teaching to the right situation.

## **Synthesis**

We can combine Paul's and James' teaching in a formal way as follows:

Justification is by faith alone for those who are seeking it by works, and by faith with works for those who are seeking it without them.

As this statement stands, it does little more than join the two leaders' teaching together. However, it does suggest a more illuminating synthesis. This is:

For a person to be justified, he or she must combine two attitudes: an utter dependence on Christ for salvation, and an earnest desire to do good works.

In other words, for someone to be justified, he or she must both be 'poor in spirit' and 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–12). Poverty of spirit precludes any thought of salvation by means of works, hungering and thirsting for righteousness any thought of salvation without them.

## Corollary

An important corollary is that evangelists should preach the gospel in such a way as to help hearers to become both ‘poor’ and ‘thirsty’. This necessarily involves teaching them the standards that God wants people to live by. It is these standards that make us fully aware of our poverty, and of the righteousness that God wants us to thirst for. Once we have this awareness, we are ready to hear that Jesus died to save us from our sins, and will send his Spirit to help us.

This accords with Jesus’ instructions to the apostles, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [and] *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*’ (Matt. 28:19–20).<sup>14</sup>

---

© 2007 P.G. Nelson. Reproduced by permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in December 2007 by Peter Nelson.

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

---

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion, see my article, ‘What is the Gospel?’ (on-line).