

Faith, Righteousness, and Works

Resolving the Apparent Tension Between Paul and James

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James, Ephesians 2:10, Matthew 5:16, Romans 1:8, 5:18, 21

KEY SCRIPTURES

The Whole Truth

It is often said, as a settled matter, that *Scripture teaches salvation by faith alone and that good works contribute nothing*. While that is true, the whole truth is both richer and more coherent than that summary allows. A careful reading of the Scriptures—from Isaiah and the Psalms through Paul, James, and the words of Jesus—reveals not a contradiction to be explained away, but a single, unified vision: faith directed toward God is the ground of acceptance, and that genuine faith inevitably proves itself in righteous works directed toward our fellow human beings. What appears to be a conflict between Paul and James dissolves once the *direction* of each relationship is properly understood.

Addressing the Apparent Problem

The difficulty is real but only on the surface. Paul writes that salvation is “*by grace... through faith... not of works, lest any man should boast*” (Ephesians 2:8–9), and that a person is justified by faith “*apart from the works of the law*” (Romans 3:28). James appears to answer flatly that a person is justified by works “*and not by faith only*” (James 2:24)—the single occurrence of the phrase “faith only” in the Bible, and it is a negative. Both writers even appeal to the very same example,

Abraham, to make *opposite-sounding* points.

Yet the conflict is more apparent than substantive. Each writer is addressing a different question, and the resolution lies in recognising what each is actually describing.

The Old Testament Foundation: Righteousness Required, Self-Righteousness Rejected

Isaiah and the “Filthy Rags”

Isaiah 64:6 declares that *“we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.”* The Hebrew image is more visceral than English translations usually convey: the “filthy rags” are actually a ritually unclean menstrual cloth, the very emblem of self-sufficiency rendered impure and fruitless. It would be a mistake, however, to read this as a blanket dismissal of righteousness itself. Scripture everywhere demands righteousness, and warns plainly that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9). Isaiah cannot be teaching that righteousness is worthless, for that would contradict the whole tenor of the prophets.

What Isaiah is pointing to, is a particular kind of righteousness: the self-generated, externally performed righteousness that human beings parade before God as though it were a payment that could purchase His favour. The menstrual-cloth image speaks precisely to *self-sufficiency*—the presumption of bringing one’s own purity to God. A fruitless task. The passage occurs within a communal confession during a season of national faithlessness; it is expressing grief over righteousness asserted apart from a right heart relationship with God, not a denial that God

requires righteous people.

David and the Contrite Heart

The Psalms locate that righteousness correctly. After his grievous sin, David confesses that God does not desire sacrifice,

Psalm 51:16–17 “..else would I give it”; rather, the sacrifices of God are “a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart.”

David does not abolish the requirement of righteousness—he identifies its source. The external act, divorced from the inward disposition, is empty. What God requires is the transformed, repentant heart, out of which true righteousness flows.

Crucially, David does not discard the works. He continues that *after* the heart is made right, God will be pleased with sacrifices and burnt offerings (Psalm 51:19). The works are not abolished; they are *reordered*—placed behind the heart as its proper fruit. Isaiah condemns righteousness asserted before God for merit; David describes righteousness flowing from a heart already surrendered to God. Together they teach that righteousness is genuinely required, but only the righteousness rooted in a contrite, God-oriented heart is acceptable.

The New Testament Resolution: Two Directions of One Faith

This Old Testament foundation prepares the way for resolving the supposed Paul–James conflict. The key is direction.

Paul: Faith Directed Toward God

Paul addresses the *vertical* relationship—how a person stands before God. Here nothing one does can establish merit; the verdict of acceptance rests on faith directed toward God and on the grace He extends. This is exactly the lesson of Isaiah’s “filthy rags” and David’s contrite heart: before God, self-asserted works are worthless, and only trusting dependence avails. Paul excludes works from the *cause* of salvation precisely to guard against boasting.

James: Faith Demonstrated Toward Man

James addresses the *horizontal* relationship—how genuine faith becomes visible and verifiable in the world.

James 2:18 “*Show me thy faith without thy works,*” he writes, “*and I will show thee my faith by my works.*”

The works are not a payment offered to God but the demonstration brought before men—the evidence that the professed faith is alive rather than dead. When the strictest readers insist that James’s word “justified” means “shown to be righteous before men” rather than “declared righteous before God,” they are, in fact, conceding this very vertical-horizontal distinction in their own terms.

Paul therefore tells us how faith is *received*; James tells us how it is *recognised*. They describe two faces of one living faith—the root and the fruit, the inward reality and its outward proof.

Paul’s Own Link: Ephesians 2:10

That Paul and James were never truly opposed is settled by Paul himself in the verse immediately following his most famous statement of grace. Having said in Ephesians 2:8–9

that salvation is not of works, Paul places good works *after* salvation as its ordained purpose. Works are not the root of salvation but its designed outcome—which is James’s point made from the other side. Paul excludes works as the *cause* and affirms them as the *consequence*.

The Words of Jesus

Jesus seals the synthesis:

Matthew 5:16 *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”*

Note the direction once more. The works shine *before men*—visible in the world—yet their ultimate reference is *vertical*, that God be glorified. The works flow from a heart already right with God and rebound to His glory rather than the doer’s merit. This maps precisely onto Psalm 51: the contrite heart first, then the acceptable offering.

The apparent contradiction between Paul and James was never a contradiction at all. The works are never the *ground* of acceptance, but always its *evidence* and its ordained *fruit*. Faith directed toward God saves; and a faith that truly saves is never alone—it walks, inevitably, in the good works for which it was created.

Obtaining Righteousness

Therefore, as righteousness is God’s requirement we now look to see how is that obtained. This starts with understanding faith as outlined above. Paul writes:

Romans 1:17 *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”*

In otherwards when God justifies a person through grace and the gift of faith, they are declared righteous and will gain eternal life. We turn to Paul again and his great statement on righteousness:

Romans 3:21-26 *“But now a righteousness of God has been revealed apart from Law, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets; even the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ, toward all and upon all those who believe. For there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God has set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness through the passing by of the sins that had taken place before, in the forbearance of God; for the display of His righteousness at this time, for Him to be just and, forgiving the one being of the faith of Jesus.”*

The Law and good works do not save. It is the believing that Jesus the Messiah paid for sin on the cross. His blood was the sufficient sacrifice that delivered the gift of righteousness to the believer. Furthermore, proof that this righteousness is not ‘earned’ by good works comes from Paul – it is a gift:

Romans 5:18 *“Therefore as by one offense sentence came on all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of One the free gift came to all men to justification of life.”*

Faith and righteousness therefore, come through grace.

Romans 5:21 *“..so that as sin has reigned to death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The witness then of the believer must be confessed.

Romans 10:10 *“For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses unto salvation.”*

Conclusion: One Coherent Vision

The Scriptures speak with a single voice when its texts are read according to their direction and intent:

1. **Righteousness is genuinely required**; the unrighteous will not inherit eternal life.
2. **Self-asserted righteousness is rejected** (Isaiah)—works paraded before God as payment for merit are “filthy rags.”
3. **The acceptable righteousness springs from a contrite heart** (David)—the inward condition God requires, from which true works then flow.
4. **Faith toward God justifies** (Paul)—the vertical ground of acceptance, apart from any meritorious work.
5. **Genuine faith proves itself in works toward man** (James, Ephesians 2:10, Matthew 5:16)—the horizontal evidence and ordained fruit of that faith.
6. **Through Jesus alone righteousness that justifies comes** (Romans 1:8, 5:18, 21)



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