Faith and Works: James, Paul, and the Rich Young Ruler — The Short Version

Paper 8 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to Paper 8. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

Two sentences that seem to collide

Paul writes, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28). James writes, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (Jas. 2:24). Both men are talking about Abraham, and both quote the same verse about him, Genesis 15:6. On the surface they say opposite things, and the argument over which one wins split Europe in the sixteenth century.

Start with who the letters were written to. Paul writes "to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints" (Rom. 1:7). James writes to men he calls "my brethren" (Jas. 1:2), and he's still calling them that when he asks whether faith without works can save (Jas. 2:14). Neither man is telling a stranger how to be saved. **Both are writing to people who already belong to God.**

Then notice that Paul says both things himself. In Romans he shuts a worker's pay out completely: "to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt" (Rom. 4:4). Writing to Corinth, he uses the very same word for pay about what a Christian receives at the end of his life: "each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Cor. 3:8). Same writer, same word, barred in one place and promised in the other. **So the problem was never Paul against James. It's Paul against Paul**, and Paul never once writes as though he had a problem.

He didn't, because he was describing two different judgments.

Two judgments

In English, *justified* and *righteous* look like unrelated words. In Scripture they're one family: to be justified is to be made righteous. And righteousness is a word about a relationship. It means meeting the standard of the one you answer to. Between man and God there's no question whose standard counts. God is holy, "of purer eyes than to behold evil" (Hab. 1:13), and to be justified is to have His judgment come out in your favor. He doesn't lower the bar, and a man can't climb up to it. God meets His own standard for him: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

The word by itself doesn't tell you which judgment is meant, and Paul uses it both ways in one letter. "The doers of the law will be justified" (Rom. 2:13) is a verdict still ahead, based on what a

man has done. "Being justified freely by His grace" (Rom. 3:24) is a verdict handed down apart from works, on the ground of Christ's blood.

The first judgment falls the moment a man believes. It rests on the blood of Christ and nothing else, and it's never reopened, because "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). **The second falls at the Judgment Seat of Christ**, where "each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). That's said to Christians. The man himself is safe; what's weighed is his reward and his place in the coming kingdom (1 Cor. 3:14-15).

Think of a child and his father's estate. The boy is his father's child from the day he's born, and nothing he does later makes him any less his father's. But when the father divides what he owns, what the boy receives depends on how faithfully he worked the field he was given. **Belonging is settled. The inheritance is still ahead.**

James is writing about the second judgment. So is Paul, whenever he talks about rewards measured to a man's labor.

Paul: what work can't do

The church in Rome had two kinds of men in it, and Paul keeps naming them both: "the Jew" and "the Greek" (Rom. 1:16; 3:9).

The Jew was already one of God's own. Each Israelite who believed God came under the blood of the Passover lamb for himself: "when I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Exod. 12:13). His standing had always rested on the Lamb those lambs pointed to, "foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1:19-20). When Jesus came, the Jew was called to repent and believe that He was that Lamb and the promised Messiah (Mark 1:15). Believing didn't make him God's a second time. It made him eligible for the inheritance his nation was being offered, the heavenly part of the coming kingdom. Most of the nation refused, and Jesus told them what it would cost: "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Matt. 21:43). The Jews in the Roman church were the ones who had said yes.

The Gentile had nothing. Paul describes where the Gentile started: "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). He had to believe that Jesus died for him. Believing brought him from death to life, and it made him eligible for the same heavenly inheritance the nation had been offered first.

Two men, two starting points, one road: "the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference" (Rom. 3:22). But some in Rome wanted the Gentile believers circumcised and keeping the Law of Moses. So Paul calls Abraham as his witness.

> "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'" (Rom. 4:3)

That verse from Genesis 15 isn't the night Abraham first came to God. Years before, he had left his home at God's word, and Hebrews says he did it "by faith" (Heb. 11:8). Genesis 15:6 is simply the

first place the Bible writes the principle down: **God counts believing as righteousness.** Then Paul points out when it happened. Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised, not after (Rom. 4:10), and circumcision came fourteen years or more later. So circumcision can't be what made him righteous. That makes Abraham father to both men in the room: the uncircumcised Gentile who believes, and the Jew who walks "in the steps of the faith" Abraham had (Rom. 4:11-12).

And Paul shuts out pay of any kind: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt" (Rom. 4:4). A paycheck and a birthday present can't be the same thing. If you earned it, it's owed to you. If it's a gift, you didn't earn it. **The deeds of the Law are never the ground on which God counts a man righteous**, not when he first believes and not in the years he walks afterward.

Paul again: what faith must do

Two chapters later, Paul puts work right back in. Someone asks whether Christians should keep sinning, since grace covers it, and Paul answers with a picture of masters:

> "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?" (Rom. 6:16)

Every man serves somebody, and that includes the Christian. Paul doesn't tell these men they'll lose what God settled in chapter 3. He tells them the road they're walking leads somewhere: "you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting [age-lasting] life" (Rom. 6:22). The life is still a gift (Rom. 6:23). But it waits at the end of the road, not the start, and **whether a Christian arrives there depends on which master he serves along the way.**

That's why the pay word Paul barred in Romans 4 comes back at the Judgment Seat: "each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Cor. 3:8). A verdict handed down on the ground of someone else's blood can't be a wage. **A reward measured to a man's own labor can't be anything else.**

When a Christian sins

If the first judgment is never reopened, what happens when a Christian sins? The sin is real, but it doesn't touch his standing. **What it breaks is closeness with God.** God told Israel, a people already His own, "your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you" (Isa. 59:2).

A marriage works the same way. A hard word spoken in anger doesn't end the marriage, but it puts a wall between two people until it's set right.

Scripture tells the Christian how it's set right: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The word Scripture uses there means to agree with God about what the sin is. No new trial is held. The blood that settled

the first judgment is already on the mercy seat, and Jesus serves as High Priest for His people; "He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). The man agrees with God, he's cleansed, and he walks on, as often as he needs to, for as long as he lives.

Abraham needed it too. After the night in Genesis 15, he and Sarai stopped waiting on God and arranged an heir through Hagar (Gen. 16:1-4). Later, out of fear, he passed Sarah off as his sister (Gen. 20:2, 11). Neither failure undid what God had counted to him. What God said to him next was about his walk: "walk before Me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1).

Agreeing with God about sin keeps a man clean, but it isn't the whole of the fruit. Peter lists what's to be added to faith: virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. He says that's what supplies "an entrance... abundantly into the everlasting [age-lasting] kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:5-11).

James: the verdict still ahead

James writes "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (Jas. 1:1), Jews who had believed Jesus was their Messiah. He tells them what his letter is about right away: the word "which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21). These men already belong to God. **What's still in play is the soul**, what a Christian's life comes to. Peter calls it a goal still out ahead: "receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet. 1:9).

Listen to the words James uses: endure, approved, a crown (Jas. 1:12), heirs of a kingdom (Jas. 2:5), judged (Jas. 2:12). None of that is the language of a man finding out whether he belongs to God. It's the language of a man who belongs to God finding out what he'll receive.

So when James asks, "Can faith save him?" (Jas. 2:14), he isn't asking whether a man is God's. He's asking whether faith that does nothing will carry a Christian to the end of the road. And when he says Abraham "was justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar" (Jas. 2:21), **he's naming the second verdict**, the one handed down at the Judgment Seat, on what a man's faith produced.

> "Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" (Jas. 2:22)

Made perfect means brought to its goal. What Abraham believed in Genesis 15 finally arrived somewhere on a mountain in Genesis 22, thirty years or more later.

James's picture of faith that does nothing is a body with no breath in it: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas. 2:26). Everything is there, and none of it moves.

What faith with works looks like

Hebrews 11 shows it. The chapter really begins a few verses earlier, with a reward, endurance, a promise still ahead, and "the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:35-39). Then it says what faith believes:

> "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." (Heb. 11:6)

Two things, not one: God exists, and God rewards. Faith leans forward toward something God has promised, and it acts on that promise now, at a cost.

That's Abraham at Moriah. Every promise God had made him ran through Isaac, and now God told him to give Isaac up. He went anyway, "concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (Heb. 11:19).

And it's what the rich young ruler wouldn't do. He came to Jesus asking, "what shall I do that I may inherit eternal [age-lasting] life?" (Mark 10:17). That's an heir's question, not a stranger's. He had kept the commandments from his youth. Jesus told him, "go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matt. 19:21). He went away sorrowful, "for he had great possessions" (Matt. 19:22). Nothing in the story says he wasn't God's. **It says he didn't receive what he came asking about.**

What this is not

A few things a reader may bring to this, and why they don't fit.

This is not salvation by works. A man's standing with God is settled the moment he believes, on the strength of what Jesus did at the cross, and nothing he does afterward adds to it or takes it away: "by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works" (Eph. 2:8-9).

This is not a penalty being assessed. The penalty for sin was paid at the cross, once. The Judgment Seat doesn't put a Christian's standing back on trial. It weighs what he did with the life he was given, and what's at stake is his reward and his place in the coming kingdom.

This is not a man straining in his own strength. The fruit Scripture asks for grows out of staying close to Jesus, not out of bearing down: "He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Why this matters

If you've been taught that James threatens your standing with God, you'll find a way to soften James. If you've been taught that Paul makes obedience optional, you'll find a way to soften Paul. Once the two judgments are kept apart, you don't have to soften either one. You can read every warning in James and Hebrews without wondering whether you still belong to God, and you can take every one of them seriously.

Your standing is settled by believing, and it's never reopened. What you do with what you believe is the substance of a verdict still ahead.

Paul and James were never arguing. They were describing two judgments, and the whole of a Christian's life lies between them.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.