

The Relationship Between Faith and Works

A Comparison of James 2:24 and Ephesians 2:8-10

Part I

Jeremy T. Alder

An Integrative Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

THESIS ADVISOR: Rev. Kenneth J. McMullen
RTS/VIRTUAL PRESIDENT: Dr. Andrew J. Peterson

November 2005

To My Father
In Loving Memory

George Thomas Alder
May 11, 1923—August 9, 2005

Who Dedicated His Life To Loving His Family
"Family Comes First"

I Miss You!

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION
THESIS STATEMENT
GENERAL SURVEY OF THE THESIS

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

CURRENT TRENDS

CHAPTER 2: JAMES

GENERAL BACKGROUND
Historical/Cultural
GENERAL CONTEXT OF JAMES 2:14-26
2:14-17
2:18-19
2:20-26
TERMS DEFINED: FAITH AND WORKS
Faith
Works
CONTENT OF JAMES 2:24
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS

CHAPTER 3: PAUL

GENERAL BACKGROUND
Historical/Cultural
GENERAL CONTEXT OF EPHESIANS 2:1-10
2:1-3
2:4-7
TERMS DEFINED: FAITH AND WORKS
Faith
Works
CONTENT OF EPHESIANS 2:8-10
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS

CHAPTER 4: HISTORICAL REVIEW

INTRODUCTION
SAINT AUGUSTINE
JOHN CALVIN
JONATHAN EDWARDS

CHAPTER 5: SYNTHESIS OF JAMES AND PAUL

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
A DIFFERENT USE OF TERMS

Faith and Works in James

Faith and Works in Paul

SYNTHESIS OF JAMES 2:24 AND EPHESIANS 2:8-10

THREE USES OF THE LAW

APPLICATION

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Introduction

The whole Christian life is characterized by the grace of God. The scriptures explicitly teach salvation is by grace and that no one will be declared righteous by the law.¹ Although this statement is true, it does not fully describe the Gospel as the scriptures teach. There is a faulty Protestant² doctrine that, on the one side, has eliminated works altogether. This false Protestant teaching upholds that a person can be saved without evidence of regeneration. Those who embrace this doctrine would claim that God loves His children “no matter what,” and since God’s love is not based on anything man has done, they deduce that good works are of no value. This perception of the Gospel is dangerous because it can leave a false sense of salvation while it denies the practical result of saving faith.

While true Protestant teaching of soteriology has eliminated all works as a cause of salvation, it has not eliminated works altogether. Therefore, many wrongly claim, on the other side, that a Christian must do good works in order to be saved or to maintain God’s blessing. God’s approval is dependent on the works performed by man. This sense of the Gospel is also dangerous because it can result in a false sense of salvation while it denies the grace of the Gospel.

What is the proper place of works in the life of a Christian? Are good works necessary for salvation? Jesus made it clear that salvation by faith will be reflected by a change in lifestyle. He said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). He also said, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). The teachings of Jesus are clear—works must be demonstrated in the life of the Christian. Dr. James M. Boice commenting on the place of works in

¹ Rom. 3:20.

² The term Protestant is used in the most generic sense. It is not used to mean the teachings of the Protestant Reformation of Luther or Calvin.

the Christian life wrote, "In my opinion, this is one of the most neglected (and most essential) teachings in the evangelical church today."³ This teaching is of great relevance because one can easily fall into the error of antinomianism on the one side or legalism on the other.

Thesis Statement

The task of distinguishing the proper role of works in the Christian life is essential for a healthy understanding of the Gospel. The purpose of this work is to establish the proper place of good works in the life of the believer as they relate to faith. Historically, the Epistle of James has been under fire for its seemingly contradictory discussion on the relationship between faith and works, especially in 2:24, with Paul's teaching, which has been the "standard" in Protestant theology. This work investigates the relationship between faith and works in James 2:24 and Ephesians 2:8-10; and it contrasts these two passages to synthesize the two perspectives into an orthodox understanding of this relationship. The approach involves a biblical, theological, and historical aspect.

General Survey of the Thesis

Chapter 1 is a literature review that will survey the ideas and trends that give shape to this area of study. Chapter 2 will focus on the Apostle James as represented by James 2:24, while chapter 3 will focus on the Apostle Paul as represented by Ephesians 2:8-10. Each chapter will include: (1) the historical and cultural background that prompted the writing of the Epistle; (2) the general biblical context of each passage while focusing on James 2:14-26 in chapter 2 and Ephesians 2:1-10 in chapter 3; (3) the definition of the terms "faith" and "works" from the given context of each passage; (4) the content of each passage; (5) the relationship between faith and works as represented by James and Paul. Chapter 4 will give a historical outlook on the development of the relationship between faith and works by investigating St. Augustine, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. St. Augustine will represent the thought as developed in the early 5th century. John Calvin will represent the mature Reformation view in the 16th century and Jonathan Edwards will represent the Puritan view of the 18th century. Chapter 5 will synthesize these two perspectives as represented by James and Ephesians into an orthodox understanding of the relationship between faith and works while contrasting James and Paul. Chapter 6 will give a conclusion.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations Of The Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 426.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The relationship between faith and works is directly related to the doctrines of justification and sanctification. The contrast of these topics in James and Paul has been much debated. Luther, who is likely the most famous for his view of *James*, did not consider this book to be canonical.⁴ Luther placed *James* along with *Hebrews* and *Revelation* at the end of the New Testament, which was published in 1522. These books were a type of supplement, which were not numbered in the table of contents. Tasker quoting Ropes' translation of Luther writes:

In fine, Saint John's Gospel and his first Epistle, Saint Paul's Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Saint Peter's Epistle, --these are the books which show thee Christ, and teach thee everything that is needful and blessed for thee to know even though thou never see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore is Saint James's Epistle a right strawy Epistle in comparison with them, for it has no gospel character to it.⁵

Luther did not consider the book to be all "straw," but Luther's struggle was that it has "no gospel character." The book has a controversial view on the relationship between faith and works and he saw the book as antithetical to Paul. Luther understood the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone to be in contrast to James who ascribed justification by works. James 2:24 seemed to violate the New Testament teaching. A man had to live in accordance with the law to be justified.

Current Trends

On this side of the debate, there are those who conclude that the theology of James and Paul are in stark contrast and cannot be synchronized. Many recent scholars share Luther's conclusion. In modern scholarship, J. T. Sanders states that James "misunderstands Paul," and "opposes the writings of Paul," and "rejects Pauline tradition."⁶ Ropes says, "James shows no comprehension of what Paul actually meant by his formula...and he heartily dislikes it."⁷ He continues and states that Paul "would have deplored as utterly superficial and inadequate James's mode of stating the conditions of justification."⁸ Bultmann, along this same line writes, "Paul's concept of faith is...utterly misunderstood. For Paul would certainly have agreed with the proposition that a faith without works is dead (2:17, 26) [Galatians 5:6] but never in the

⁴ William Barclay, 6.

⁵ R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 14.

⁶ Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 121-122.

⁷ "his formula" refers to Justification by Faith Alone.

⁸ James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916), 35-6.

world with the thesis that faith works along with works (2:22).⁹ Many other scholars express similar views.¹⁰

On the other side of the debate, there are those who conclude that James and Paul are united in their theology. Moo comments, “On this point [the concept of faith in James], James and Paul are in complete agreement.” He further writes regarding the place of works in justification, “Understood in their own contexts, and with careful attention to the way each is using certain key words, it can be seen that James and Paul are making complementary, not contradictory, points.”¹¹ Calvin also saw no contradiction. He wrote, “I, however, am inclined to receive it [The Epistle of James] without controversy, because I see no just cause for rejecting it. For what seems in the second chapter to be inconsistent with the doctrine of free justification, we shall easily explain in its own place.”¹² Many other scholars also accept this view.¹³

This thesis views the scriptures as infallible and will stand firm in the genuine solidarity of James and Paul and takes the position that there is no contradiction between the theologies of these two Apostles. The theology of those scholars that sets these two against each other will be rejected. While this work acknowledges the apparent tension between the writings of each, it will validate the given position.

In the area of the lordship of Christ, there has been the debate between Zane Hodges and John MacArthur. Hodges represents the “free grace” view and MacArthur represents the “lordship theology” view.¹⁴ This controversy is important because it addresses the nature of salvation including the nature of saving faith. There are a variety of topics within this debate, but only those immediately relevant will be mentioned.

Advocates of Hodges’ view are Michael Cocoris, Charles Ryrie, Bob Wilkin, and the Grace Evangelical Society.¹⁵ The “free grace” position maintains that faith can stand

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 2:163.

¹⁰ E. C. Blackman, *The Epistle of James* (London: SCM, 1957), 96; J. C. Becker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 251; S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 132-3; and G. Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 153-4.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 45-6.

¹² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*. trans., John Owen. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 276.

¹³ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 160-71; James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 34-36; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 638-9; W. J. Burghardt and T. C. Lawler eds., *Saint Augustine on Faith and Works* trans. Gregory J. Lombardo (New York: Newman Press, 1988), 3-4.

¹⁴ Millard J. Erickson, “Lordship Theology: The Current Controversy,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 33 (1991): 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

without personal evidence. The aspects of repentance, good works, and commitment to the lordship of Christ are absent. Faith is simply believing biblical truth. Hodges writes:

A Greek reader who met the words “he who believes in me has everlasting life,” would understand the word “believe” exactly as we do. The reader most certainly would not understand this word to imply submission, surrender, repentance or anything else of this sort. For those readers, as for us, “to believe,” meant “to believe.”

Surely it is one of the conceits of modern theology to suppose that we can define away simple terms like “belief” and “unbelief” and replace their obvious meanings with complicated elaborations.¹⁶

Faith for Hodges is belief; he further writes, “The Bible knows nothing about an intellectual faith as over against some other kind of faith (like emotional or volitional). What the Bible does recognize is the obvious distinction between faith and unbelief!”¹⁷ Hodges never fully defines faith, but he describes it when he writes, “What faith really is, in biblical language, is receiving the testimony of God. It is an *inward conviction* that what God says to us in the Gospel is true. That—and that alone—is saving faith.”¹⁸

“Free grace” advocates embrace faith that stands alone; a faith independent from repentance, good works, and submission to the lordship of Christ warrants salvation. Hodges rejects and views as heresy the notion that a regenerate person will necessarily perform good works because of his regeneration; he also rejects the view that if one claims to be a Christian but does not perform good works, he has forfeited his eternal life or never possessed it.¹⁹ Faith alone justifies the sinner before God, but this does not mean that the sinner has fellowship with God. Good works sustain fellowship, but they are not required as evidence of salvation. Hodges separates these two aspects of the Christian life in the same way he separates faith from Christ’s lordship. Fellowship requires repentance and good works while salvation does not.

Hodges’ understanding of the book of *James* is that James is not teaching that works are necessary for the saving of the soul from hell. He understands James to be speaking of those works that save from the immediate effects of sin. He writes, “It is easy to see how obedience to the word of God can ‘save the life’ from the death-dealing outcome of sin.”²⁰ Also, regarding the book of *James*, he explains that the role of works never justifies man before God, but rather before man. It is the way by which salvation is seen by others.

¹⁶ Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1989), 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁹ Millard Erickson, 8.

²⁰ Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981), 24.

James Montgomery Boice, J. I. Packer, and John Piper support MacArthur's stand on "lordship salvation."²¹ MacArthur's view does not separate the call to salvation and fellowship with God. MacArthur writes, "The Gospel Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship, a call to follow Him in submissive obedience, not just a plea to make a decision or pray a prayer."²² In his view, faith is obedience to Jesus. MacArthur understands faith to be a gift of God, which includes repentance.²³ Describing faith, MacArthur writes, "The faith God begets includes both volition and the ability to comply with His will (cf. Phil. 2:13). In other words, faith encompasses obedience."²⁴

In this view, saving faith is obedience to Christ. Faith is demonstrated by submission to the lordship of Christ. MacArthur rejects the position that separates saviorhood from lordship. He describes Jesus' ministry by writing, "He made it clear that obedience to divine authority is a prerequisite of entry into the Kingdom. Clearly, His lordship is an integral part of the message of salvation."²⁵ This view understands faith as an obedient submission to the Lord that is characterized by fellowship and good works that resulted from regeneration.

These two views are trying to maintain a biblical understanding of the nature of faith. Hodges is concerned with the mixing or adding of works to grace for salvation. He maintains that salvation is by faith alone and any requirement of works or even their necessity as a fruit of faith violates the integrity of the Gospel. MacArthur insists that works necessarily flow from faith and where there are no works, salvation is uncertain. For him, if works are not linked with faith then the full scope of the Gospel is not maintained.

From the literature surveyed above, we can conclude that the relationship between faith and works is an issue that has been much debated since the Reformation (and earlier as discussed in the Historical Review below). There are those scholars who have placed James and Paul on opposing sides, while others have concluded that the two Apostles are in complete harmony and are simply stressing different aspects of the nature of saving faith. Also, there are the writings of Hodges and MacArthur that demonstrate the continual dialogue which continues to debate this topic. This work is aimed at continuing the investigation of the true nature of biblical faith and its relationship to good works as it compares James and Paul.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

²¹ Millard Erickson, 9.

²² John MacArthur, *The Gospel According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 21.

²³ Millard Erickson, 10.

²⁴ John MacArthur, 173.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).