

Justified by Faith; Justified by Works.

Text: Rom 3:28, Jam 2:24

Suggested Hymns:

104, 258, 270, 346, 484

1) Justified by faith

2) Justified by works

3) Only a paradox

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The theme for our sermon today is justified by faith; justified by works. It is based on two Scripture texts,

Romans 3:28, ²⁸ *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.* (NKJV)

And James 2:24, ²⁴ *You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Here we have two passages of Holy Scripture which seem to be in conflict. Paul concludes that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law and James states that we see that a man is justified by works and not by faith only.

This is one of the best-known paradoxes in Christianity. But as is the case with other paradoxical truths, so here, too, as we examine these passages in the light of other Scripture texts, we see that the contradiction is only a seeming one.

How, if we are justified by faith only, can we insist on the necessity of good works? Does the Biblical insistence that we are saved by grace through faith prompt us to neglect Christian living? Did Paul proclaim one religious system and James another?

Dare a Christian become neglectful in the fruits of faith because he is sure of his religious convictions? What did our Lord teach about faith and works? These and similar questions will be answered by studying carefully the meaning of today's two Bible passages and the impact they should make on our Christian

faith and life. Here is the paradoxical truth; Justified by Faith; Justified by Works. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Justified By Faith

Let us consider what Paul means in the first text. In the opening verses of his Epistle to the Christians at Rome Paul interweaves the Apostolic greeting with a summary of the significance of the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Then he states that he is not ashamed of *“the Gospel of Christ.”* It is his deep conviction that this Gospel of the crucified but risen Saviour is the *“power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.”*¹

Since the atoning work of Christ alone is all-sufficient, it follows from Paul’s summary of Christianity that a veneer of pagan morality could not gain God’s favour for man. Indeed, the Apostle goes further, stating that even a rigid obedience to the Old Testament Jewish regulations would not bring salvation.

Several verses before our text we are told in Romans 3:23, ²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* Only by believing that he is *“justified freely through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”*² does man appropriate God’s righteousness. Bringing this argument to a resounding conclusion, Paul in declares in our text, *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.*

Let us examine these familiar words carefully. They will bring to us also the same Christian assurances they have brought to so many believers through the centuries.

As a believer writing to fellow Christians Paul says, *“We conclude.”* He means that on the basis of faultless evidence it is our conclusion, our confession, our conviction, that since we have in the revealed Word the objective declaration that we are righteous through Christ, we become just in the sight of God by believing this message.

Justification is a divine act by which God declares a sinner righteous for Jesus’ sake, and whoever believes this WORD is righteous without the works of the Law. The commentaries on the original text go into great detail to show that the word “justify” cannot mean “make or become righteous,” or “make upright.”

No matter what a man is or is not, through his Christian faith in the Gospel, which declares him righteous, he is righteous.

Specifically this is the historic Christian faith, not some vague and nebulous idea unrelated to Christ's redemptive act. This doctrine then excludes being accounted righteous because of merit in man, and so that there might be no misunderstanding, the Apostle adds that this justification is without the deeds of the Law. Earlier, in Romans 3:20, Paul had said the same thing ²⁰ *Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight.*

When Martin Luther was translating the Bible into the language of the German people, he worded this passage to the effect that man is justified by faith only. In certain quarters he was criticised for inserting the word "only," since it was not in the original Greek text. But Luther maintained that his wording was correct, for he said that anything else within the limits of human reason would belong to "works."

The Apostle's utter rejection of any possibility other than faith in the propitiatory sacrifice³ is the same as saying that a man is justified by faith alone.

This is our Christian conclusion also. But like Paul we first must seek to lay the groundwork, the foundation of all preaching, that is, of leading every sinner to realise that when he receives as his personal Saviour from sin Jesus Christ, that this believing is his appropriation of God's declaration, ***"Justified! Declared righteous!"***

This is why the Formula of Concord says, *"This article concerning justification by faith is the chief article in Christian doctrine."*⁴ "The doctrine of justification is, as it were, the strand on which all the pearls of Christian revelation are strung."

2. Justified By Works

If this Christian faith is living and vibrant, there will be the results of faith, the living proof that faith is not dead. *"Mere improvement is not redemption, though redemption always improves people."*⁵ If the Christian faith does not produce good works, it is only a sham, "sounding brass or a clanging cymbal."⁶

The Apostle James found it important to stress this truth. He states flatly, ²⁴ ***You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.*** James by

no means eliminates faith. Thus our text follows chapter 1, in which an unwavering faith is called for,⁷ and is found in a chapter which begins with the need for faith in *“the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”*⁸

James’ point is that Christianity is a religion of faith and works, not of faith only or works only. He shows that this was true even of Abraham, the father of believers. And right after referring to Abraham as one whose faith brought the fruits of faith in good works, James continues with our text. Show me, if you will, a person who has the Christian faith and who doesn’t do good works, is his ringing challenge. *“By works faith was made perfect”* as we read in James 2:22. Faith without resultant good works would be imperfect faith.

Paul preached good works, too. It is helpful in solving these paradoxical statements of Paul and James to stress that the Paul also preached justification by works when the occasion demanded. The careful Bible student will never isolate one text but will diligently compare Scripture with Scripture.

In the chapter preceding our text Paul is speaking of the certainty of divine judgment. He says there that this judgment will be according to works. At that time God *“will render to each one according to his deeds.”*⁹ In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul says, *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, And he adds, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*

Paul charged the Corinthians that they should have *“an abundance for every good work.”*¹⁰ To the Ephesians he said the same thing, *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*¹¹ To the Colossians he wrote, *that you may walk worthy of the Lord, ... being fruitful in every good work.*¹² And to Timothy he instructed, *Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share.*¹³ To Titus he stated, *“This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works.”*¹⁴ The assertion that the two texts indicate a clash between Paul and James cannot be maintained in the face of the passages just quoted.

The Final Judgment will be determined by works. The great importance of good works as the fruit of faith can be gained also from the Bible verses that

speak of the great Judgment Day at the end of the world. Jesus commanded us to let our light shine before men that they might see our good works.

Of that day we are told in Matthew 16:27, ²⁷ ***“For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.*** Matthew 25, with its description of the final Judgment, condemns of anyone who denies the necessity of works for perfecting our faith. The house built upon the sand collapsed and ***“great was the fall of it,”*** because even though the builder heard the words of Christ he did not do them.¹⁵

The last book in the Bible, the Revelation of John, teaches the same need for good works. In one of the letters to the seven churches, Jesus says, ***And I will give to each one of you according to your works.***¹⁶ We read in Rev. 20:12-13, concerning the last resurrection and judgment, ¹² ***And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.*** ¹³ ***The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.***

The last chapter of the Bible adds a final proof as we read in Revelation 22:12, ¹² ***“And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.***

3. Only A Paradox

The two texts speaking on the one hand of justification by faith and on the other hand of justification by works thus present only an apparent conflict. For both Paul and James are referring to the same thing. The reason they present two different facets of the same gem of Scripture is that the circumstances were different. As was proved by statements from his Letters, Paul, when he needed that emphasis, never hesitated to stress the all-importance of good works.

When we begin looking beneath the surface words of Scripture, we discover that in the final analysis it is the different motive that determines whether works are good works, justifying works, or not. Whenever a Christian does something, or says something, or helps someone, and thus reflects the Gospel light shining in his heart, then his work is a Gospel-motivated work.

But when his deeds and words are a result of natural law, done with the view of earning his salvation, then they are not good works in the Christian sense. Such Law-motivated works do not and cannot justify.

Paul realised that at times even Christians are tempted to rely on Law-motivated works without true faith in the living Christ. But he was writing also with non-Christians in mind, who hope to be saved by their works, and despair when they awake to the real situation. Guided by God's Holy Spirit he therefore wrote that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law.

On the other hand, the Apostle James, inspired by the same Holy Spirit, was writing to individuals who were prone to isolate faith as such from good deeds, the fruits of living faith. His readers had the idea that they might merit the verdict "justified" because of their cleverness or their purely intellectual knowledge of justification by grace. So he wrote to them that they should not deceive themselves, for works are necessary as the effect of faith. This is clear from James 2:26, ²⁶ *For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*

Our Saviour once used the homely illustration of the vine and the branches to teach these truths. He said that He is the Vine. His heavenly Father is the Vine-dresser, the Keeper of the vineyard. The believers are the branches. The parable stresses the necessity of producing fruit. The Vine-dresser will prune the vines to produce fruit. This action refers, of course, to the fruits of faith, or good works.

In a vineyard, would one say that the branches produce the grapes? Yes, we would agree to that statement. Does the vine produce the grapes? Yes, we would answer. But there could be no yield of grapes if we would sever the branches from the vine.

So in Christian theology, we can have no fruits of faith when we are severed from Christ, when our works are motivated by the Law and not by the sweet Gospel of a forgiving Saviour. Thus Paul writes that we should be *"filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."*¹⁷ If a word or deed is prompted by the fear of the Law or the hope of gain rather than by a believer's response to God's mercy in Christ, it is not a good work in the Scriptural sense.

Our conclusion, then, is that there is no real contradiction in the two texts which speak of being “justified by faith” and “justified by works.” Both statements are true. It is not an “either-or” proposition, but a “both-and” situation.

On firm Bible ground, we can very correctly speak of a religion of faith and of works. For true Christian faith will never be alone but will always produce the fruits of faith, which we call good works. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Romans 1:16

² Romans 3:24

³ Romans 3:24

⁴ Concordia Triglotta, p. 917, par. 6

⁵ C. S. Lewis

⁶ 1 Cor. 13:1

⁷ James 1:6

⁸ James 2:1

⁹ Romans 2:6

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 9:8

¹¹ Ephesians 2:10

¹² Colossians 1:10

¹³ 1 Tim. 6:18

¹⁴ Titus 3:8

¹⁵ Matt. 7: 24-27

¹⁶ Revelation 2:23

¹⁷ Philippians 1:11