Faith Works!
Faith, Works, and the Apparent Controversy of Paul and James.

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Abstract: There are probably few students of the scriptures who are not familiar with the controversy surrounding the definitions of faith that are sometimes gleaned from the writings of Paul and James. Some feel that James presents a doctrine of justification based upon works; a position that contradicts Paul's doctrine of justification based upon faith. "This apparent contradiction to the teaching of the apostle Paul has caused much consternation among some theologians. For example, Martin Luther referred to the book [of James] as 'an epistle of straw' when compared with Paul's writings."[1] This article will defend the position that there is no such contradiction between the two author's viewpoints and present the common doctrine that is the product of these positions and defines the relationship between faith and works.

> *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NIV.)*

If one were to attempt to select the most important teaching in the Christian faith, the choice of the doctrine of justification by faith might not be far off of the mark, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9, KJV.) The very foundational truth of scripture pertaining to justification is that God has provided a single way for mankind

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[1] Patterson, Paige (1991). Questions and Challenges of James. <u>Holman Bible Dictionary</u> (CD-ROM). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

to be forgiven of the sin that separates from Him, and that way is through faith in Him through Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches through imperative and example that there is no type of work that can, in and of itself, overcome this separation.

Paul's doctrinal position concerning faith as recorded in the book of Ephesians, as well as in his other writings, present salvation as a free gift of God, given by Him to those who express true faith in Him, by and through the name of Jesus Christ. However, James also writes, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified…" (James 2:24a, KJV.) Some feel that the book of James presents a doctrine of justification based upon works; a position that contradicts Paul's doctrine of justification based upon faith. "This *apparent* contradiction to the teaching of the apostle Paul has caused much consternation among some theologians. For example, Martin Luther referred to the book [of James] as 'an epistle of straw' when compared with Paul's writings."[1] Such a conclusion comes, not from a discrepancy in Biblical content, but rather from incomplete or erroneous exegesis of the applications of the words *faith* and *works* as used by the two writers.

A. Faith and Works in the Old Testament

For the purposes of this study, the primary conclusions on the application of the concepts of faith will be based on doctrine as presented by the New Testament writers. However, the New Testament is, through Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the Old Testament; not a replacement of it (Matthew 5:17.) The fundamental relationship between faith and works was first established in the Old Testament. A fundamental misunderstanding and consequent misapplication of the relationship between works and the Old Testament law has done much to fuel erroneous theology concerning the ability to find salvation through good works. So, before exploring the New Testament faith/works dichotomy, we should observe that same relationship in the Old Testament.

A short journey into the use of the noun *faith* by the Old Testament writers might be instructive. The noun appears only twice in the King James Version of the Old Testament (Deut. 32:20; Hab. 2:4),[2] where the Hebrew words *'emuwn* and *'emuwnah* are respectively used. However, these two words appear a total of 54 times in the Hebrew text.[3] The former word is also translated as "faithful" four times and "righteous" once. The latter word is also translated "steady" once, "truth" thirteen times, "faithful" three times, "faithfulness" eighteen times, "faithfully" five times, "set office" five times, "verily" once, "truly" once, and "stability" once. The primary context of the use of these words convey the idea of believing in and trusting in God with honor, loyalty, and integrity, as well as God's integrity when dealing with mankind.

The New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 11 makes several references to the faith of Old Testament figures, and a search of the Old Testament nouns that describe their faith include *'aman*, *batah*, and *hasah* and several others. Similar word studies on the application of these words open up a magnitude of additional uses. Consequently, this broad use of the term makes it difficult to compare the Old Testament and New Testament uses of that word, *faith*. Some scholars see both a collective faith and an individual faith in the Old Testament that is united in Abraham. Still others argue that the Old Testament contains no doctrine of faith, but rather provides examples of faith.[4]

The Old Testament, by and of itself, uses all of these forms to describe a righteousness that is imparted by God upon those who (using the above described Hebrew noun forms) have faith

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[2] Findlay, G.G. (1909). Faith. Dictionary of the Bible. ed. James Hastings, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. p. 255.

[3] Strong, James (1890). The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (CD-ROM). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

[4] Garrett, J.L. Jr. (1995). Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. p. 235.

in, who trust in, who believe in God and who seek to follow His will, His word, and His way. It is a faith that is confessed, professed, and visibly demonstrated by the attitudes and actions of these patriarchs. We find no application of a patriarch who is described has having faith or trust in God who did not demonstrate it through some attitude or action that is motivated by that faith and trust. These are works of faith to be contrasted with works of the Law.

The Old Testament also teaches a righteousness based upon works of the Law that God passed down to man:

> *"Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right. He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or lie with a woman during her period. He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. He does not lend at usury or take excessive interest. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between man and man. He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD"* (Ezekiel 18:5-9, NIV.)

So, God has provided a way of salvation that is not by faith, but by works. However, this plan has a caveat: to attain such a righteousness, one must obey *all* of the law. "The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness" (Deuteronomy 6:24-25, NIV.) Similar statements are found in the Old Testament in Numbers 15:40;

Deuteronomy 11:32, 12:28; Joshua 1:7, 23:6, and in many other references. The breaking of a single tenet of the entire law is the equivalent of breaking the entire law.

> ***"If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name--the LORD your God -- the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses"*** (Deuteronomy 28:58-59, NIV.)

This caveat is so complete, that "If a person sins and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord's commands, even though he does not know it, he is guilty and will be held responsible" (Leviticus 5:17, NIV.) Consequently, it is impossible without God's grace for any man to attain righteousness under the law. Our sin nature constantly gets in our way, and as a result all people, without exception, come short of true righteousness based upon the law alone

> ***"Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; therefore the curse is poured upon us, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him"*** (Daniel 9:11, KJV.)

The law by itself cannot save, and works of the law have no redeeming value. God has "seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14) and God will "bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil," (Ecclesiastes 12:14, NIV) exposing the righteousness and works of man that will serve as no benefit to him (Isaiah 57:12.) "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our

righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away" (Isaiah 64:6, NIV.)

The only remedy provided for those who lived in Old Testament times was the forgiveness that God gives when the sinner responds to God in repentance through faith and trust in Him.

> **"And if I say to the wicked man, 'You will surely die,' but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right -- if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live. Yet your countrymen say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But it is their way that is not just. If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he will die for it. And if a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he will live by doing so"** (Ezekial 33:14-19 NIV.)

During the intertestamental period, the preoccupation with works-based righteousness developed into the fundamental religious doctrine of the Jewish community. It was into this setting that John the Baptist preached about repentance, and Jesus came to restore people to faith.

B. Faith and Works in the New Testament

The application of the word *faith* in the New Testament is not as difficult to follow as it is in the Old Testament. There is predominantly one Greek word form that is used to describe faith: *pistis* the verb, and *pisteuo* the noun. The word *faith* appears no less than 245 times in 229 verses in the King James

version of the New Testament.[5] The first few occurrences of the word in the Gospel of Matthew reveal that Jesus described that there were varying levels of faith from small (Matthew 6:30) to great (Matthew 8:10.) A great faith can do mighty works (Matthew 8:26; 17:20.) Faith is a prerequisite to the receipt of Jesus' healing (Matthew 9:22), is the opposite of doubt (Matthew 14:31), and was not a characteristic of the works of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:23.)

One of the clearest descriptions of the relationship between faith and works, as taught by Jesus, is included in the Gospel of John, chapter 11. Jesus describes good works as the natural fruit that is produced by a tree as a result of its very nature.

> ***"I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing"*** (John 1:5, KJV.)

This is a radical and heretical teaching to the works-based Pharisees. Those who "abide in" or who have faith in Jesus Christ will bear fruit, and any work that takes place outside of this context (works of the law) are of no redemptive value. "The earliest Christians were Jewish Christians. Christianity was born out of Judaism, and many early Christians did not perceive a sharp distinction between the two."[6] Consequently, it was only natural that the Pharisaical views of the Jews would be embraced by some early church members. The Pharisees' works paradigm involved adherence to a long list of written and oral traditional laws that dictated most of their everyday activities. They did not understand the words of the prophet, "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their

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[5] Ibid, Strong.

[6] Grissom, Fred A. (1991, Spring). "Heresies in the Early Church", Biblical Illustrator. 17(3), p. 11.

God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33, KJV.) Jesus described fruit as those Godly acts that arise out of a heart motivated by *agape* love, and its absence from the soul is an indication of a lack of true faith in Jesus. "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" (1 John 3:17, KJV.) Paul lists some of the spiritual fruits in his epistles: "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22-23a.) Jonathan Edwards was so convinced of the inseparable relationship between faith and works that he stated,

> All Christ's peculiar people do not only do good works, but are zealous of good works, (Tit 2:14) No man can do the service of two masters at once. They that are God's true servants do give up themselves to his service, and make it as it were their whole work, therein employing their whole hearts, and the chief of their strength. (Phil 3:13) "This one thing I do." Christians in their effectual calling, are not called to idleness, but to labor in God's vineyard, and spend their day in doing a great and laborious service. All true Christians comply with this call (as is implied in its being an effectual call), and do the work of Christians.[7]

Much of Paul's writings concerning the relationship between faith and works were written to Christians who were under a significant amount of Jewish influence, many by their own Jewish heritage, and others by the Jewish Christian influence within the church. "Paul's contention with the Judaizers in Galatia was over the means and grounds of justification. It is utterly impossible for one to be justified by the works of the law"

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[7] Edwards, Jonathan (1750). <u>A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections</u>: In Three Parts. Public domain. Part 3:XII, ppg. 6.

(Gal. 2:16; 3:11.)[8] Paul responds very harshly to those who seek to place a burden of law-based works on the Christian community.

> ***"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified"*** (Galatians 2:15-16, KJV.)

To the Jews and the Judaizers he saw this philosophy as a fatal snare that kept them from salvation "because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone'"(Romans 9:32.)

Some Christians understood their freedom from the law, and took that concept a step further when they felt:

> ***"that since faith alone is necessary for salvation, one is free from the moral obligations of the law. While it is true that obedience to the law will never earn salvation for anyone (Eph. 2:8-9), it is equally true that those who are saved are expected to live a life full of good works (see, for example, Matthew 7:16-20; Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:10; Jas. 2:14-26). Since we have been freed from the dominion of sin through faith in Jesus, we have also been freed to practice the righteousness demanded by God*** (Rom. 6:12-22)."[9]

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[8] Ladd, George E. (1974, rev, 1993). <u>A Theology of the New Testament</u>. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. p. 489.

[9] Strange, James F. (1991). Antinomianism. <u>Holman Bible Dictionary</u> (CD-ROM). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers..

Paul teaches that this "righteousness demanded by God" cannot be attained by works of the law. Since no person has ever been able to live a sinless life, breaking no part of the law, then all people are unrighteous and in need of God's grace (Rom. 3:23.) Paul teaches that salvation is a gracious gift of God, given to those who have faith in Him (Rom. 6:23). When Paul speaks of faith, he is speaking of "a complete trust in and obedience toward Jesus Christ."[10] When he speaks disparagingly of works, he is referring to "the works of the [Jewish traditional, written, and oral] law: outward acts of conformity to a ritual and moral code for the sake of acquiring merit."[11]

Unlike Paul's writings that run the entire scope of Christian doctrine, the book of James 'addresses the outward expression of inward faith."[12] A casual observation of the relationship between faith and works that is presented in James 2:14-26 has presented to some interpreters a conflict with that same relationship presented by Paul. "James' strong emphasis on being active in the service of the Lord comes out in his treatment of faith and works. Evidently he had been confronted by come Christians who maintained that it was only necessary to believe. As long as they had faith, it did not matter how they lived. James rejects this in a most forthright fashion"[13] that appears to be in conflict with Paul.

The key to comparing these positions must include what James is meaning through the uses of the words faith and works. James' use of the word *faith* is not the same as Paul's and this difference is demonstrated in Jas. 2:19, "thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (KJV.) The demonic spirit does

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[10] Richardson, Alan. (1958). An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. p. 240.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Minnix, J. Mike (1993) Panorama of the Bible, (CD-ROM) Huntsville, AL: Evangel Publications. Lesson 49.

[13] Morris, Leon (1986) New Testament Theology. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. p. 313.

not express any trust in Christ, nor attempt in any way to be obedient to Jesus, as Paul's definition of faith would necessitate. Furthermore, James' use of works is not the outward acts of ritual that Paul is referring to. When James is referring to the works that are motivated by faith, he is referring to acts of mercy, kindness, generosity, etc., that are more typical fruits of the Spirit. To summarize the application of the terms of these two writers we find:

Paul:

- *Faith is complete trust in, and obedience to, Jesus Christ.*

- *Works are outward acts of ritual and adherence to a code to attain merit.*

James:

- *Faith is belief in Jesus Christ, the resurrection, and salvation.*

- *Works are spontaneous acts of love that spring from the fruits of the Spirit.*

    "He [James] has no idea of disparaging faith, which he everywhere assumes as present and which he highly values. His point is that faith and works are inseparable in any properly constituted Christian life, and he argues this clearly and effectively."[14]

When we consider these presuppositions, we find that there is no conflict in doctrine between James and Paul. A common denominator between them is found in John, Chapter 15. *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit"* (John 15:1-2, KJV.) Jesus is the source of works for those who

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[14] Ropes, James H. (1954). A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. p. 35.

have faith, and those works are presented in this chapter as "fruit." One would not expect an apple tree to bear figs, or an orange tree to bear potatoes. An apple tree bears apples because it is the nature of the tree to do so. Likewise, a Christian bears fruits of the spirit because it is the nature of the spirit within all Christians to do so. This is how James can say, "I will show thee my faith by my works" (2:19, KJV.) James is not referring to the keeping of Sabbath laws; he is referring to works that are fruits of the Spirit. Consequently, James can say that "faith without works is dead" (2:20, KJV.) For some believers, the understanding of this principle can be the difference of salvation. Belief in Jesus Christ is not sufficient for salvation:

> ***Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity"*** (Matthew 7:22-23, KJV.)

Works of the law that are outward acts of ritual for the purpose of receiving merit are of no value for attaining salvation. However, those who trust in and obey Jesus Christ will produce works that are motivated by the Spirit that will serve to build up the Kingdom of God by through the evangelism of the lost, the edifying of the saints, and the Glorification of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and God, the Father. If those works are not evident in the life of a professing Christian, their level of trust and obedience in Christ is suspect.

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