

The Gospel War: Paul vs. James

Sola Fide: Justification By Faith Alone – Part V

Romans 3:27-28

Introduction

In the early 1500's, there was a massive theological collision. It caused an explosion, of which the after effects are felt even today, after more than five hundred years. It was a necessary collision; a much needed debate and reform over the issues of spiritual and theological corruption that had become a way of religious life. It revolved around the definition of justification by faith.

History - Controversy Over Justification By Faith Alone

Specifically, this collision debated how justification related to the sacrament of penance. This sacrament of penance was defined by the Roman Church as the second pillar of justification. The first pillar was infant baptism.

If a person sinned after his baptism, and he certainly would, there needed to be a restorative penance. The Roman church believed, over five hundred years ago and still today, that the really bad sins kill justifying grace. Something must be done by the sinner to restore grace, or the soul of the sinner is in peril. All of the sacraments of the Roman church were designed, in one way or another, to continually justify the sinner in the eyes of God.

The church held that salvation was not a one time transaction, whereby God the Father attributed the righteousness of Christ to the sinner. They maintained that justification is a process over a lifetime, with the hope that, if you do everything you are supposed to do, then, in the end, your time in

purgatory will be limited and your soul will eventually go to heaven.

Justification by faith alone vs. Indulgences

One of the good things you should do revolves around the doctrine of penance. The sacrament of penance included the issue of indulgences. An indulgence involved a good deed, a prayer, a gift, a visit to a holy site, and/or an act of sacrifice. By doing any or all of the these, God is, to a small degree, satisfied, and another measure of grace is bestowed on the penitent.

It was this issue that added immeasurably to the corruption within the church. The church developed an entire system of indulgences where, in crass terms, sins could be atoned for with good deeds, including monetary gifts. In fact, many of the great cathedrals in Europe were financed by the sale of indulgences. People were told, "Here's how you get forgiveness; here's how you satisfy God; here's what you do to get a little more grace on your journey to heaven."

People, of course, bought them. For instance, in the year 1300, the Pope issued Jubilee Indulgences to all who visited the tombs of the apostles on fifteen successive days. Of course, you had to have a ticket to see the tomb.

If you were reading your newspaper at the time, you learned that the current Pope declared the year 2000 to be a Jubilee Year. He offered indulgences to all the faithful who received mass in one of the several cathedrals throughout Europe. Their observance of mass in these designated places, he

promised, would reduce some of their future time in purgatory.ⁱ

By the 1500's, indulgences were bringing in so much money that the church called it a "holy business". A banking establishment, in Germany, was engaged to handle the money. Saint Peter's Basilica, in Rome, was built with the money from the sale of forgiveness.

Linked to the issue of indulgences was the matter of relics. The cathedrals of Germany had, on display, thousands of relics, which ranged from a twig from Moses' burning bush to a tear that Jesus shed when He wept over Jerusalem.

I was in Europe, a few years ago, and watched as people paid to see a relic that had recently been put on display. It was a thousand year old bony hand of a cardinal or bishop, I cannot remember which, that was wrapped in satin and wearing jeweled rings. The person who paid the dollar to see it, (and I, obviously, paid the dollar to see it, not to get grace, but to see what a relic looked like), supposedly received a blessing from God, which translated ultimately, into saving grace. It simply made my stomach sick for the rest of the day.

In the early 1500's, so many pilgrims were flocking to one particular city in Germany to see sacred relics, pray the proper prayers, and make the proper offerings for the sake of earning indulgences, that the university in that city was completely endowed. It was the University of Wittenberg.

One of the promises the pilgrims had been given by the Roman church was that, if they came to this city and prayed the prayers and made the offerings, they could cancel nearly two million years in purgatory. That only leads me to wonder how long a person has to languish in purgatory before he eventually atones for his sins and is allowed into heaven.

Since it was also taught that indulgences could be earned for the sake of loved ones who had already died, you can only imagine the fervency of the people. This is like the fervency of modern day Mormons, who spend hours being baptized on behalf of their dead relatives. Their belief in atoning for deceased relatives who were not Mormons, has sparked an huge genealogical operation. Their genealogical system is unrivaled in the world. Why was it created? So that the Mormon can track his family tree back as far as possible and then, can be baptized for each of them. They believe this allows

their dead relative to go to heaven; that is, one of their three heavens, I am not sure which one.

The German city of Wittenberg was already overflowing with devoted followers of the church's belief that justification could be bought. In the spring of 1517, a church leader arrived in this city with the Pope's banner flying. His name was Johann Tetzel and he had come to raise money for the building program of St. Peter's, in Rome.

The words to one of Tetzel's sermons have been preserved. He preached,

You should know, whoever has confessed and is contrite and puts alms [money] into the box, will have his sins forgiven . . . so why are you standing about idly? Run, all of you, for the salvation of your souls . . . do you not hear the voices of your dead parents and other people, screaming and saying, "Have pity on me, have pity on me . . . we are suffering severe punishment and pain, from which you could rescue us . . .".

Pilgrims rushed forward, earned their indulgences, and St. Peter's was completed.

Martin Luther and the Reformation

Johann Tetzel's sermon, that spring, was the last straw in the heart of a monk who was teaching New Testament at the university. He had earlier, converted to a belief in Christ through faith alone by studying the book of Romans. That professor's name was Martin Luther.

In October of that same year, Martin Luther posted ninety five statements, or theses, on the door of the church in Wittenberg. He wrote them in Latin, intending to begin a theological discussion with the faculty and church leadership in Wittenberg, on the sale of grace and forgiveness.

However, in one of the great ironies of history, which we can now see as the providence of God, there was the new development of something called a, "printing press". This changed everything. Against Luther's own original desires, his theses were translated into German, printed "en masse" and, within two weeks, they were circulated throughout the entire German nation.ⁱⁱ

Like a spark of fire to dry wood, Martin Luther's ninety five challenges started a firestorm of controversy. It was a controversy that ultimately saw him condemned by the Roman church and his writings labeled heresy.

The collision occurred, and a movement began and gained momentum, brought about by those who protested indulgences and believed the Bible clearly taught justification by faith alone. It was a movement that, in fact, got its name from Rome because of their protesting – the name of Protestants.

A French attorney converted to the truth of this movement, which was now considered a Reformation. He eventually formalized Protestant doctrine in his “Institutes,” derived directly from the authority of Scripture. His name was John Calvin. Calvin wrote, “Let it therefore remain settled that we are justified in no other way than by faith . . . or, [to say it another way], we are justified by faith alone.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Justification by faith alone vs. another gospel

What I find absolutely amazing, ladies and gentlemen, is that the doctrine of justification is as controversial today as it was five hundred years ago.

And why not?! As early as the first century, in the church in Galatia, the primary problem was the distortion of the gospel. Paul warned them by saying, in chapter 1, verses 6 through 7,

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

In other words, they did not want to create an entirely new gospel, as that would never be accepted. So, instead of creating a new gospel, they were saying, in effect, “Let’s just twist the one we’ve got to our advantage and to our liking. Let’s not get rid of Jesus, let’s just redo His image. Let’s create a system where man depends on the church for salvation and add to that the fact that man has to be good in order to get into heaven. That will keep everybody ‘civil’ and, at the same time, stroke the nature of man which really doesn’t want to admit he’s helpless to do anything to save himself. That will allow him to ‘help God’ get him up to heaven.”

Paul says further, in verse 9,

As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed!

So, the question is, what gospel did the Galatian believers receive that is never to be changed, diluted,

distorted, compromised, hedged, or weakened? What gospel did the apostles preach?!

Turn to Romans, chapter 3, and listen again to Paul’s description of salvation – justification by faith. In verses 27 and 28, Paul begins to summarize everything he has been saying in this paragraph on justification by faith. Notice verse 28, which some manuscripts begin with the word, “therefore,” meaning, “in summary”.

[Therefore] we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

That is why he could say in the previous verse, verse 27,

Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.

The word “law,” in this verse, could be translated “rule or principle”. Thus, the last phrase could be read, “. . . by a principle of faith.”

In other words, Paul asks the question, “What can anybody be proud of, when it comes to salvation? What right does anybody have to puff out their chest and say, ‘See what a good person I am?!’”

The truth is, man is born incurably proud of himself. Warren Wiersbe said, “Man is the only living creature that tends to swell up whenever you pat him on the back.”

Everybody has the amazing dexterity to pat themselves on the back.

In Luke, chapter 18, the Lord illustrated spiritual pride by telling the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went into the temple to pray. The Lord said, in verse 11,

The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself. . .

This is an interesting choice of words, because the Pharisee was obviously not praying to God, but was only talking to himself. Continue in verse 11, he prayed,

. . . God, I thank You that I am not like other people . . .

By the way, if you want your prayers to bounce off the ceiling and come back down and hit you over the head, start your prayers like this guy, “Lord, I thank You that I’m not like other people.”

Then, in the last part of verse 11, he specified which people he was better than,

... swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

Evidently, while the Pharisee was praying, he spotted one of the most despicable people in his society – a tax collector. Some things never change, right?

In the first century, a tax collector purchased, from the Roman government, the right to open an income tax business and tax his fellow Jews. The Jews would pay their share that went to Rome, and then, the tax collector would collect more and keep it for himself. Thus, he was considered a traitor and a thief, because he usually charged exorbitant taxes to pad his own wallet. If there was anybody you were better than, it was the tax collector.

The Pharisee continues, in verse 12,

I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all I get.

Was the Pharisee making this up? No! Did he fast twice a week? Yes! Did he pay tithes of all of his money? Yes! Did he ever swindle or steal or take his neighbor's wife? No! Was he a good man? Yes!

Jesus went on to say, in verse 13,

But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

He would not even look up! He just beat on his chest and said, in this prayer of deep confession, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

Then Jesus said, in verse 14,

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified . . .

The word "justified," in this verse, is the same Greek word that is used in Romans, chapter 3, verse 28. This man was justified, or declared righteous, forgiven, redeemed.

The one who did not boast became a true believer; the one who boasted was only playing make believe.

Paul is saying, in Romans, chapter 3, verses 27 and 28, "The principle of true faith eliminates spiritual pride,

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

It could not be any clearer, could it?!

Martin Luther wrote, "All who are justified are justified for nothing, and this is credited to no one but to the grace of God."^{iv}

So, where do those who oppose this definition of faith apart from works find their support in Scripture? I am glad you finally asked!

Paul vs. James

They find their support in a verse of Scripture that seems to totally contradict what the apostle Paul has said. It is a verse of Scripture, written by the apostle James, that has caused more confusion than perhaps any other, in relation to this issue of justification by faith. Let us look at the verses by Paul and by James side by side.

Paul writes in Romans, chapter 3, verse 28, For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works ...	James writes in James, chapter 2, verse 24, You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith . . .
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Paul states, "... justified by faith . . ."; James states, "... justified by works . . .". Who is right?

They both are! The answer lies in an understanding of the different approaches that these two men were taking to the same subject.

Paul and James had two different purposes, two different contexts, two different objectives, and two different emphases that God intended to communicate through them.

James – Types of Faith

James is actually talking about three kinds of faith. Two of the types are false and only one is alive.

Dead faith

1. The first kind of faith that James refers to is "dead faith". Dead faith is without works.

Look at James, chapter 2, verses 14 through 17, and underline the first words in verse 14 and the same words in verse 16, "What use is it . . .".

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith, but has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body,

what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

This is the person who says, “Yea, I’m going to heaven because I have faith in God.”

The truth of the matter is, however, they have nothing to do with God. They say they have faith in Christ, but Christ has nothing to do with their life. Christ is not in their thoughts; Christ has nothing to do with their finances; Christ has nothing to do with their crass vocabulary or their sensual dress; Christ has nothing to do with their plans or their careers; Christ has nothing to do with their reading material or their schedules; Christ is given token attention on Sunday for an hour or more, but that is as far as their faith goes.

James says, “That person’s faith is dead. It doesn’t exist; it’s barren.”

Demonic faith

2. The second type of faith that James refers to is demonic faith.

Look at James, chapter 3, verse 19.

You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons believe, and shudder.

Dead faith is faith without any outward evidence of holy living. You could say that it is words without action. This second type of faith, demonic faith, is words without worship.

However, make no mistake, the demons believe. Have you ever thought about the fact that there is no such thing as an atheistic demon or an agnostic demon? They:

- believe in the existence of God;
- believe in the existence of the Son of God and Spirit of God;
- do not doubt that there is only one true and living God;
- do not doubt the creation of the world – they were there when it happened;
- do not question the authenticity of Scripture – they have seen it stand up to scrutiny by generation after generation;
- do not sit around and debate the historical truth of the resurrection of Christ – they saw it happen.

Why will a demon never go to heaven, even though he believes everything a Christian believes? It is because they can say all the words, but they do

not worship God; they will not bend their heart to the reign of Christ; they will never worship God.

So, James describes dead faith, which is faith without works; demonic faith, which is words without worship, and a third kind of faith that is the only genuine faith there is.

Dynamic faith

3. The third kind of faith that James describes is dynamic faith, which is faith that works and worships!

James has a different perspective on the subject of justification than the apostle Paul. James and Paul actually, in the end, are complimenting one another, not contradicting one another. You will miss that fact, however, if you do not understand the differences in the messages that Paul and James are attempting to communicate. Let me point out a number of differences between the messages of Paul and James that actually compliment each other.

Different Objectives of Paul and James

1. First, Paul and James have different objectives.

Paul is defining justification, so the objective of Paul is to define salvation or justification. He is writing theologically that the definition of justification is faith alone.	James is illustrating justification, which is illustrated not by faith plus works, but by faith that works. He is writing practically, saying, “what use is it . . . what use is it?” He wants to illustrate authentic faith with life.
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Let me illustrate James’ illustration.

Marsha and I brought home from the hospital, at some point in our marriage, four little babies. Early in our marriage, when I was in seminary, we decided to wait until after we had finished school to try to have children. However, in my last semester in seminary, God revealed his sense of humor by giving us two of them at the same time. Both of them were delivered at Baylor hospital in Dallas, Texas. I remember that after the first one was born, he began to cry immediately – loudly! Two minutes later, the second one was delivered and, after a good smack, he cried as well. We all breathed a sigh of relief because he had been higher up in the womb and his heart rate had gone down during each contraction. So, when he was delivered and then cried, we knew

his heart was beating. It was the only time his crying was a wonderful thing!

His cry did not give him life, however, it simply revealed he was alive. His piercing cry did not produce life, it proved life.

In the same way, James is illustrating the fact that good works do not produce life, they prove life exists. So, we could say it this way, "Faith in Christ produces life; work for Christ proves life."

Different Emphases of Paul and James

2. Notice, as well, that Paul and James have different emphases.

Paul is emphasizing the foundation for salvation, which is justification by faith alone.	James is emphasizing the fruit after salvation, which is works and not faith alone.
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In other words, faith without fruit is not genuine faith at all. True faith is revealed in fruit.

The person who says that they are a Christian, yet evidences no fruit, is self-deceived. It is not enough to simply say, "I have faith!"

Different Audience of Paul and James

3. Paul and James also have a different audience in mind.

Paul is talking about being justified in the eyes of God.	James is talking about being justified in the eyes of man.
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You are justified in the eyes of God by faith alone. You are justified in the eyes of man by works alone.

James makes his point in chapter 2, verse 24,

You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

In other words, people cannot see your faith, they can only see your works. So, faith alone does not justify you before the eyes of man. Works reveal to people that your faith exists!

Different Results of Paul and James

4. Paul and James are actually after different results.

Paul wants the believer to be able to defend his faith.	James is challenging the believer to demonstrate his faith.
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True saving faith is independent of good works. However, true saving faith works.

In other words, James is startling his readers with the truth that a profession of faith is meaningless without the practice of faith. In fact, James is actually saying that those who profess faith and do not practice faith, do not possess faith that is alive and genuine.

John Calvin wrote, in the early 1500's, "It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies is never alone!"

Do you want to be justified before God? It comes from faith in Christ alone. Do you want to be justified before mankind? Do you want to be real? Do you want the world to know your faith is authentic? Then live for Christ!

As Jesus said, in Matthew, chapter 5, verse 16,

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Whatever you do, do not pit Paul and James against each other. They are on the same side! Put them together and you will get a full and rich understanding.

The gospel war is only a war when you miss the differences between Paul and James in their objectives, their emphases, their audience, and their intended results.

Dr. W. H. Griffith Thomas wrote, nearly one hundred years ago, "Paul and James are not soldiers of different armies fighting against each other, but soldiers of the same army fighting back to back against enemies coming from opposite directions."

Paul is fighting against the enemy called, "faith plus works". James is fighting against the enemy called, "faith that does not work".

Either enemy is deadly. Either enemy is fruitless. Either enemy is deceptive. Either enemy is another gospel.

The truth is, justification is by faith without works, yet those who are justified by faith, work. They find their greatest fulfillment in serving, glorifying, and pleasing their great God and Savior, their Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

The one who does not care to do that, does not have faith. The one who has true saving faith, has, as his highest ambition, as Paul wrote, to be pleasing to God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/9/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ News and Observer (Jan. 19, 2000).

ⁱⁱ R. C. Sproul, Faith Alone (Baker Books, 1995), p. 57.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 173.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 133.