

# **Line ‘Em Up: A Five Paragraph Essay About Faith & Works**

**Romans 3:27-31; James 2:14-26**

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In the church newsletter a couple of weeks ago, I referenced a practice of getting my students to write down questions—about God, about the Bible, about life—that our group could use to fuel its discussions. One of the questions that we received almost every time we passed out index cards and went through this exercise was “Why does the Bible contradict itself?” It’s a hard question to address. It obviously puts the responder on the defensive, and the specific answer depends entirely on what passages the questioner has in mind.

Take, for example, the scripture readings for today. In Romans 3:28, Paul states clearly “a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” In James 2:24, James insists “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” These two verses use almost exactly the same words to make the exact opposite points. These two verses are why my youth—and many of their parents—asked “why does the Bible contradict itself?” Surely it can’t be both...either we are justified by faith alone or by faith and works, but not both. Right?

To try to get a handle on this, it’s worth examining the two texts with an old-fashioned “compare-and-contrast” exercise. When I was in high school, one of my English teachers taught us several different ways to write a compare-and-contrast essay. This was longer ago than I’d care to admit, but if I’m remembering correctly: one option was to analyze Item #1 thoroughly and then analyze Item #2 by noting how it was similar and different from Item #1. Another option was to analyze Item #1 and Item #2 at the same time, pointing out what they had in common (“compare”) and then pointing out what they didn’t have in common (“contrast”). For two short verses like this, my English teacher would have been all about this second strategy, analyzing Item #1 and Item #2 at the same time.

My English teacher also would have been a big fan of having three distinct points to compare and contrast, as this would set up the extremely familiar Five Paragraph Essay. For those of you who are not familiar with the extremely familiar Five Paragraph Essay: it’s a structure that advises a student to write an introduction, then develop three body paragraphs that support the introduction, and then compose a conclusion. It was extraordinarily popular during the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, so much so that it experienced remarkable backlash in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One educator criticized this form as being “dysfunctional...off-putting, infantilizing and intellectually arid.”<sup>1</sup> (Can you tell he’s a professor?) I bet they don’t even teach this anymore.<sup>2</sup>

But if I were writing a Five Paragraph, Compare-and-Contrast Essay about faith and works and James and Paul, it could not be laid out more cleanly for me. This is because James and Paul both use three critically important words, and understanding how they use those words is the key to making sense of these verses and their supposed contradiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Labaree, David F. (15 February 2018). "The five-paragraph fetish". *Aeon*. Quoted by [Wikipedia](#). Retrieved 20 October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> My wife, who taught composition at Wake Tech for over a decade, assured me that they do, no matter what David Labaree thinks.

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Let's start in the place that James and Paul at least partially agree: they both think **faith** is important. And who wouldn't? We spent a Sunday just a few weeks ago reflecting primarily on faith itself, on its energy and purpose, its mystery and conviction, and its ability to inspire gratitude and joy. Faith is the reason why we are here and the cornerstone of our church experience. If we can't agree that faith is important, everything else is a nonstarter.

But, precisely because faith is so expansive and enigmatic, James and Paul seem to be talking about different aspects of faith. Paul is writing to the church at Rome, imploring them to embrace humility instead of boasting about the things they have achieved. From what we know about imperial Rome, it's not hard to imagine the church there needing a quick reminder about the value of humility or the lack of value of power, prestige, and wealth. For Paul, in this verse, faith is "the abandoning of one's own efforts [to] trust in God instead."<sup>3</sup> Paul is concerned with the beginning of faith, the moment where someone first buys into this mysterious relationship with God.

James agrees with the value of faith, but he is more concerned with what happens to that relationship over time. And over time, James argues, our faiths should be more than a statement of belief but something more pervasive, something integrated into every aspect of our lives and character. It should be something reflected not only in what we say but also in how we live and how we love.

In short, Paul's faith is cut-and-dried, either you believe or you don't. And James's faith is much more nuanced and detailed. If you compare faith to a marriage, Paul's description of faith is concerned with the wedding itself, the "I do's," the moment of commitment that everything else hinges on. And James is concerned with the years that come after the wedding, the shared meals and inside jokes and created memories that shape and color a marriage.

Both parts are equally critical to a marriage, and it's fair to refer to both the wedding and its aftermath as the "marriage"...but they are not the same thing. Likewise, both the initial commitment and the prolonged development are critical to our faiths, and it's fair to refer to each part as "faith"...but they, too, are not the same thing.

So when Paul says that "we are justified by faith apart from works," he's saying that you have to have that initial moment of faith, the "I do" moment that makes the commitment to Christ and to Christ's teachings an actual commitment. He's saying that you have to touch first base or the run won't count, even if you round the bases. He's right about that. And what James is saying is that stopping on first doesn't do any good either. He's also right.

The differences in James's and Paul's approaches to faith are slight; the differences in their approaches to **works** are extreme. When Paul writes that works will not justify us, he specifies that he's talking about "works of the Law." That's a very specific list of actions, a list outlined in the Torah that consists of things like keeping the Sabbath, circumcision, clean eating (not, like, Keto—eating just items from the approved list in Leviticus). He's referencing ceremonial and ritual practices. Paul isn't saying those things are bad, but he's definitely saying they're not as important as faith itself.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, N.T. (1998). *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 10). Abingdon. 479.

James, on the other hand, is talking about a completely different kind of works. The works that James mentions include caring for widows and orphans and the poor, elevating the underbelly of society, and putting the needs of others ahead of one's own. In other words, Paul is talking about works that were designed to demonstrate and, to some extent, to earn faith; James is talking about works that emanate from and thereby reflect a genuine faith.

I suspect we have all encountered people who had a Jesus bumper sticker on their car and then cut us off in traffic. I tend to envision the moment of putting the bumper sticker on the car as the kind of work that Paul is talking about, an action that is meant to demonstrate and claim that faith exists...but anyone can slap a bumper sticker on their car, and I'm pretty sure God cares more about what we believe than how we decorate our vehicles. Likewise, I tend to envision the discourteous driving as the absence of the kind of works that James mentions. James would emphasize that if a person with a Jesus bumper sticker cuts someone off in traffic, their stated beliefs ring hollow...and faith shouldn't ring hollow.

So, when James and Paul are talking about faith, they're talking about the same thing, but different parts of the same thing. And when they're talking about works, they're really talking about different things altogether. Those distinctions alone would be enough to have them sound like they contradict when actually they don't...but there's a third critical shared word in these verses, and it too is worth examining in detail to make sense of what James and Paul are writing.

The word is **justified**. Unlike "faith" and "works," it's a much more complicated and uncommon word, a word that doesn't sound as simple or straightforward. If Paul and James were able to use "faith" and "works" to mean different things, it's practically a given that they're using justified to mean at least slightly different things.

James uses "justified" in the way that most of us use the word today—basically the same way we'd use it in the sentence "the ends justified the means." In that sentence, the ends proved that the means were worthwhile, valuable, or valid. The ends proved that the means were on the right track. James would say "our works are what show that we are on the right track." He might even say "our works are what show that our faith is on the right track."

But Paul is using "justified" to mean "righteous," or "right by God." Paul's "justified" suggests something that we cannot earn, something that can only be gifted by a perfect God.<sup>4</sup>

If we think about "justified" the way that a copy editor would, with words aligned a certain way on the page, and we think about "justification" as referring to things being lined up: James is concerned with our faith and our works being lined up together...and Paul is concerned with our faith and our God being lined up together. And, in the end, it seems critical that all three—God, faith, and works—are in line with one another, are justified.

So, I think I'd summarize things this way:

- Paul wants us to understand that our ritualistic actions don't line us up with or put us right by God. A genuine faith is the only thing that will put us right by God.
- And James wants us to understand that the only genuine faith is one that is reflected in our works, one that includes serving those in need.

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<sup>4</sup> Cara, Robert J. "[Justification: Paul vs. James.](#)" *Table Talk*. Retrieved 20 October 2021.

I suspect that the best way to make sense of James & Paul is the secret third way that my English teacher taught a compare-and-contrast essay, which is to say, “The very premise of comparing and contrasting James and Paul is faulty.” My teacher called this strategy “attack the question,” and he warned us that it was sort of a high risk, high reward option. No teacher wants to be told they’ve come up with a bad compare-and-contrast prompt...but if you can argue it effectively, it’s hard for the teacher not to be impressed.

“Why does the Bible contradict itself?” It doesn’t. It just seems like it does when we fail to read it carefully, when we fail to pay attention to the context of each verse and the deeper meaning of each word. “Why does the Bible contradict itself?” is a faulty question.

In fact, in this particular situation, I’d go a small step further and say not only that James and Paul are not at odds with each other but also that they complement each other. They are both necessary to make sense of this particular issue. Paul lines up God and faith; James lines up faith and works. In the end, all three must be aligned.

Most scholars believe that Paul and James didn’t have access to each other’s writing when they were composing their own letters, so it’s a little unfortunate that they chose such similar words when they were talking about different things...or maybe it’s actually helpful, since their word choice is what allows us to line everything up.

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Last week, I preached that the book of James covers the essentials, the first and foremost of our faith, the non-negotiables. There is a reason that this is the topic James turns to in this second chapter, the first thing he covers in detail after the prologue of chapter one. The underlying argument he makes is that our faiths must be genuine. He is primarily concerned with this authenticity showing up through selfless deeds, but his root point is that faith must be authentic. He shares that root point with Paul...and with Jesus.

Jesus saves his harshest and most frequent condemnation for hypocrisy. He is more concerned with a faith that is real than with anything else. It is fitting that James and Paul take the same unmovable stance.

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This is probably a B+ five-paragraph essay. Depending on the grader, it might be even worse than a B+ sermon...I apologize for asking you to follow all of that close detail to just a few words. I think this likely works better as an essay or a Bible study than it does as a sermon...but these are important words with diverse and nuanced meaning, and they are worthy of our attention even if things get a little tedious. But, still, this is not my favorite sermon.

A sermon should speak to more than words. It should speak to life...so, here at the end, let me see if I can do that.

I have spent a lot of time this week reflecting on the men and women that I admire the most. They are mentors and professors; family, friends and colleagues; wizened souls and innocent children. They are hard workers with open minds. Perhaps more than anything, my personal heroes are people who seem to understand how to navigate our world without becoming consumed by it or dismissive of it.

These men and women and children, without fail, live lives that exemplify the three words that I have spent today analyzing to pieces. They see people in need and move quickly to serve those needs, almost always without drawing attention to themselves. They do this because of their faiths, their genuine living faiths that direct each aspect of their decision-making. They embody goodness in their works because they have such faith. And they have faith not in themselves or in the world or in some ambiguous undefinable quality...but rather in God. Their God, their faith, and their works are aligned perfectly...and that, I am certain, is why I admire them so deeply.

I am guessing that we all have people in our lives like this. I can tell you about my heroes, but I'll wager it is more effective for you to think upon your own.

When people like this—people who have lined up God, faith, and works—when people like this navigate our world, they clear a path for the rest of us to do the same. This is how we live life. This is how we see God. And this is why the alignment of these three things is of such concern to both James and Paul, and why understanding that alignment is a non-negotiable in the first place. These are not just words. They are life itself.