

Justification by faith alone or by faith plus works?
Reconciling Paul and James on the meaning of the term
“δικαιόω” or "justify."

THE MEANING OF 'JUSTIFY' IN JAMES 2:21-25

Introduction

James 2:21-26 is a part of the passage section that starts from 2:14-26 in which James strongly affirms the inseparability of faith and works. As McKnight puts it, James must be read in light of James before one reads him in interaction with Paul.¹ He makes a case that James' main concern is to argue for the ineradicable necessity of works due to faith in Christ.² Having pointed out the church's prejudices and partiality, especially against the poor in the faith community, he strongly condemns such practices as inconsistent with the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ (James 2:1-13). James is confronting believers who think faith in Christ and not works is all they need to have a relationship with the Lord. While it is true that faith alone in Christ alone is the means for justification, James' audience missed a crucial point embedded within this truth. They failed to acknowledge the necessity of works in their faith relationship with Christ, so James endeavored to correct this misperception.

¹ Scott. McKnight, *The Letter of James*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 1.

² McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 224–26. Richardson writes, “For Paul faith that trusts the word of God saves. This was his understanding of “faith alone.” This simple faith is the point of entry “into Christ.” But for James, the overarching concern was with demonstration. Given that so much can be done within the church out of “bad faith,” what is meant by “faith” must be clarified by deeds. For James “faith alone” was a crass avoidance of the necessity of demonstrating faith” See Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 141–142.

To illustrate his argument about the inseparability of faith and works, James gives two Biblical examples from the Old Testament: Abraham, the revered patriarch (2:21-24), and Rahab, the redeemed prostitute (2:25).³ He presents each example as a question, anticipating the reader's ready agreement. Then he concludes with a body metaphor to illustrate how faith without works is utterly dead (2:26). Therefore, this paper will attempt to explain what James meant in 2:21 when he said that Abraham was justified by works when he offered his son Isaac. Is this passage teaching that justification for salvation is by faith and works or faith alone?

Justified by works or by faith alone

The phrase “ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη” translated as “justified by works” in James 2:21, raises significant debates among scholars because the usage of “δικαιώω” has led to a significant misconception that James contradicts Pauline chief message of justification by faith without the works of the law.⁴ Since the term “δικαιώω” is a significant issue in this verse, it is of paramount importance to understand the term in general and finally compare James' usage of this term with Paul's usage of the same. However, like many others, this phrase cannot be understood without its immediate and larger context.

So, before doing a study of the phrase “ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη,” it is worth taking time to survey the context first. Context is the chief determinant of word meaning. The key theme of James's epistle is genuine faith in Christ.⁵ James only takes a short time after his salutation before

³ J. Ronald Blue, “James,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 826.

⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David Allan Hubbard, Glenn W Barker, and John D. W Watts, vol. 48 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 91.

⁵ Dan. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 57.

introducing the subject of faith; he talks about believers' faith. In the section of 2:14-26, in which the word "ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη" is found, James narrows down his subject of faith by contrasting two types of faith, namely, genuine faith and dead faith.⁶ According to James, genuine faith (James 2:18) is faith evident in one's life through works, whereas dead faith (James 2:17) is faith claimed by a person whose life does not exhibit good works. From 2:14-19, he pronounces such dead faith as useless and unable to save. Therefore, his main argument is that faith is not mental consent or mere acknowledgment of a fact but rather an acknowledgment and a transformation. Demons acknowledge God's existence but are not saved or transformed by that. So genuine faith must have evidence of transformation demonstrated by good works.

After giving a sharp contrast between genuine (saving) faith and dead faith, he illustrates his point about genuine faith. In 2:20-26, James draws illustrations from the lives of two Old Testament figures (Abraham and Rahab) who exhibited genuine faith.⁷ McKnight rightly says, "Verse 20 -26 is James' response to the rhetorical question in verse 14, in which he emphasizes the ineffaceable [irreplaceable] necessity of works due to faith in Christ."⁸ At this point, James makes a radical statement in verse 21 that gave rise to significant debates since the reformation.⁹ Verse 21 says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?". In this verse, the word "justified" or "δικαιόω" is the main issue that deserves much attention if one is to understand James' point. This word has raised long-lasting debates because James seems to teach that works, not faith, is the basis for justification

⁶ McCartney, *James*, 154.

⁷ McCartney, *James*, 161.

⁸ McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 225.

⁹ McCartney, *James*, 161.

unto salvation, which would be contrary to Paul's theology of justification by faith alone without works of the law. In this case, Paul and James appear contradictory, and contradiction in scripture is incompatible with the doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy of scriptures. Is James contradicting Paul or not? The following paragraphs will focus on resolving this tension.

The word “δικαίωω” has several meanings, namely: to show/do justice; to vindicate; to make free; to prove to be morally right.¹⁰ Regarding experience or activity of transcendent figures with people, “δικαίωω” means to vindicate (Mat. 11:19) or being vindicated; to be found in the right (Deut. 25:1; Mat 12:37; 1 Cl. 30:3); to be free of charges/to be acquitted (Exod. 23:7; Rom 3:20; Gal. 2:16; 1 Cl. 32:4).¹¹ More so, “δικαίωω” can be used in a general sense to denote “think or deem right.”¹² Therefore, it is evident that the word “δικαίωω” has been used with different meanings in both the Old and New Testament scriptures.

Having surveyed the meaning of the word “δικαίωω,” the next step is to understand James' usage of this word in the context of his epistle. Based on the context of James, it is evident that “δικαίωω” in James does not mean justice. It can either mean to be acquitted or to be found in the right. However, since James is referring to Abraham's act in Genesis 22, he is aware that Abraham was declared righteous based on his faith, not his works (Genesis 15:6). Is James trying to ignore the righteousness reckoned onto Abraham based on faith? No. He instead acknowledges Abraham's obedience in Genesis 22 as proof of Genesis 15 experience (James 2:24).

¹⁰ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 249.

¹¹ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 249.

¹² James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 162.

For this reason, James must be using “δικαιόω” in another sense, in which case, “to be found in the right” fits well into James’ context. As McCartney attests, many commentators from Calvin to recent support that by “δικαιόω,” James argues that Abraham's obedience to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen 22) was not the basis upon which God declared him righteous, but this act of obedience demonstrated the genuineness of his faith.¹³ McCartney goes on to assert that, for James, to justify does not mean "to save," but "to justify" means to "show" or "prove."

Conclusion

Therefore, Paul and James do not contradict each other, but these two authors address different subjects, using the same word with different intended meanings. Paul discusses the priority of saving faith in salvation, whereas James talks about the proof of saving faith.¹⁴ Believers in this messianic community were struggling with living out their faith. Throughout this epistle, James focuses on correcting the faulty view of some church members who thought that faith was a matter of being part of a community. He contends that saving faith is not a mere sentiment or an intellectual conviction devoid of good works such as: acts of mercy, kindness, regarding the poor and the rich as equal image bearers. Such faith must be genuine to stand the test of suffering, and such faith renovates one's lifestyle-it brings evident transformation.

¹³ McCartney, *James*, 163.

¹⁴ Blue, “James,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 826.

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