

## The Justification of Abraham

### - Or why the Catholic/Orthodox concept of Justification is more biblical than Protestant ideas

Catholics (and Orthodox Christians) and Protestants have different ideas on the nature and meaning of the term *justification*. For the Protestant, the Greek word usually means "*being declared righteous*". This being declared righteous happens in the beginning of the Christian life, when he has faith in God. But justification is seen *as an act of God*, that it is solely God who declares a person righteous (*monergism*). It is by God's grace *alone*. And then the Protestant usually immediately mentions that justification is through *faith alone*, and not by works. The Christian's *faith* (in God and Jesus Christ) is credited him as righteousness. Actually, it is Christ's righteousness, which the believer "obtains". When God looks at the sinful believer, He sees Christ's righteousness instead of the sinfulness of the believer. This is called *imputed* righteousness. This imputation of Christ's righteous to the believer is by faith "*alone*". Then, the lifelong journey of sanctification begins. Works are only the result of faith, but they do not justify nor save the believer.

Catholics and Orthodox Christians do acknowledge that "justification" in the NT sometimes means "*being declared righteous*". But they hold that "justification" also can mean "*being made righteous*". For Catholics, justification is a process, a process that starts with the faith of a person, and continues with the transformation of that human being into a holy person. It is not only God's working, but God working together with the believer (*synergism*). Justification is by faith, but faith is not just faith "*alone*", but a concept more holistically being *trust*, which also includes obedience and works. His faith and works together justify the believer, not only declaring him righteous, but really making him righteous. This is called, *infused* righteousness – the believer is becoming more and more righteous by his ongoing faith and works. Sanctification is not something happening after Justification, but it is part of Justification.

<b>Catholic/Orthodox view</b>	<b>Protestant view</b>
Justification = being made righteous	Justification = being declared righteous
A process	A moment
By grace through faith and works	By grace alone through faith alone
<i>Synergism</i> (God working together with the believer)	<i>Monergism</i> (only God working)
<i>Infused</i> Righteousness	<i>Imputed</i> Righteousness
Sanctification is part of Justification	Sanctification comes after Justification

Now, in this study I will refer to the Catholic/Orthodox view by just mentioning "Catholic". This is mainly because I've read more about the topic "justification" from Catholic apologists, not because I see the Catholic View in general superior to the Orthodox view. On "justification" the differences between the two are very small. And it just saves time and space by just mentioning "Catholic".

## Paul versus James

***Romans 3:28: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law."***

***James 2:24: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."***

These two famous verses shape the Protestant-Catholic-debate about relationship between faith and works for the justification of the believer. And it actually looks like there is a debate going on in the New Testament between Paul and James. They seem to be arguing, whether one is justified by faith apart from works or justified by faith and works. As we will see, a careful analysis will show, that one can accept and interpret both verses avoiding a contradiction.

One important fact about the phrase "by faith alone" is that the text in James is the only text in the whole Bible that couples the word "faith" with the word "alone". And that verse in James does *not* affirm "by faith alone", but instead *deny* it. We are not justified by faith alone, James says in his letter.

Now there are two possible contradictions between Romans 3:28 and James 2:24. The first one has to do with the word "faith" and the second one with the word "works".

### **A false contradiction: "by faith *alone*" vs. "not by faith alone"**

But reformator Martin Luther made things a lot more confusing and difficult, when he added the word "*alone*" to this text of Romans 3:28.

*"For we hold that a person is justified by faith alone apart from works of the law." (Luther)*

By doing so, Luther made Romans 3:28 contradict James 2:24:

***"A person is justified by faith alone" ⇔ "A person is justified not by faith alone"***

Of course, it *could be* that the apostle James is talking about *another kind of justification* than the apostle Paul in Romans - we will see shortly that this is not the case. But this apparent contradiction, created by Luther's choice to add that one little word to Romans 3:28, is likely the most important cause of the great division between Protestant and Catholic theology. It has led to more than 500 years of fierce debate between the two camps. And it was all unnecessary. Because Romans 3:28 in its original version and James 2:24 do not contradict each other. In fact, by holding the two of them in equally high esteem, not preferring one above the other, we will be able to uncover much more truth than if we just would have one of the two texts.

But before we focus on the right interpretation of the two texts combined, let us start thinking about what Paul means in Romans.

## Romans 3

When Paul introduces the term to justify ("dikaioo") in Romans 3, he does so after establishing the sinfulness of all mankind. Everybody is under *the power of sin*, there is *no one who is righteous*. Everybody is under the *condemnation of the law*. The whole world will by that law be held accountable to God. The law brings wrath, because all have sinned. And therefore, no one can be justified in God's sight by deeds prescribed by the law.

But then Paul proceeds to explain, that God has provided for a righteousness, which is apart from law, but instead by God's grace for all who believe in Jesus Christ. Then Paul says this:

**Romans 3:28:** *"For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."*

Being *justified by faith* is the solution to humankind for the problem of evil and sin. Nobody can be justified by works of the law, because the law condemns a sinner, even if he committed just one little sin! Somehow, according to Paul, God has found another way for the sinner to become righteous: *by faith*.

## More of Paul and James

**Romans 4: 2-5:** *"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness."*

**James 2: 21-24:** *"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Thus, you can see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? Thus, the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."*

## Romans 4

The first thing to note here, is that Romans 4 is a continuation of Romans 3, where Paul speaks about *works of the law* (Romans 3:28). And where he mentions, that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. So "*works*" in this context likely refers to the "*works of the law*" of Romans 3.

So what exactly are "*works of the law*"? Paul explains that here: "*to the one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due.*" If somebody works for an employer, there usually is an

employment contract, which on one side obligates the employee to do his work properly; and on the other side obligates the employer to pay wages to the employee. If the employee does his work faithfully, the employer *is obligated* to pay the employee.

And this is exactly how the religious Jewish people thought about justification: *that they would keep the law, and by doing so, justify themselves*; that they could say to God: *"See, we have kept your law. Now you accept us and declare us righteous!"*

Now, Paul says: one can *never* be justified by doing the works of the law. Why not? The answer is simple: *no one is fully able to obey God's law*. And just *one single time* of breaking the law would immediately *condemn* any human being. Under the system of law *everybody* is under condemnation.

But then Paul proceeds to say, that man can be justified by faith. By trusting God, one can be justified. The *faith* of the believer is reckoned him as righteousness. And Paul uses Abraham as an example of righteousness by faith: *"Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned him as righteousness."* This is a quote of Genesis 15:6. What exactly happened there?

God has just promised Abram (only later his name became "Abraham") that *his offspring would be as countless as the stars in the sky*. And Abram believed God. That faith was credited to him as righteousness. At that moment Abram was still without a child. And he would continue to be childless for a while. Later, in Genesis 17, we read about God making the covenant of circumcision with Abram. At that time Abram was 99 years old. God renamed Abram "Abraham" and promises him again that he will become *a father of many nations*, and that God would make an *everlasting covenant* with his descendants. Later, God started fulfilling his promise by giving Abraham a son: Isaac. This was against the odds, because Sarah was already way beyond a child-bearing age: it was a miracle.

Paul makes an important statement about the faith of Abraham. He states that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness *before* Abraham was circumcised. This is an important point, because it proves that Abraham's righteousness was *of his faith*, and *not* of his circumcision. And therefore the righteousness of faith is not only for the Jewish people (the circumcised), but also for the Gentiles (the uncircumcised), for everyone, who like Abraham *have faith in God*.

It is clear, from all of this, that the condition for being justified, is *having faith*. But because Paul so clearly talks about *"without works trusting God"*, *"by faith apart from works of the law"*, it is quite natural to think that it must be a justification by faith *"alone"*, meaning by *faith and not by works*. And that is how Protestants have interpreted Romans 3 and 4. The letter of James though is a gamechanger.

## James 2

James is a very practical letter, drawing out concrete situations, and focusing on the behaviour of a believer. He stresses the importance of works; for example:

- *"Be doers of the law and not merely hearers."* (1:22).
- *"You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture; "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (2:8).

The letter being so practical has led some to regard it as less theologically important for the developing of doctrine. This in contrast to Paul in his letter to the Romans, who really provides a long *"treatise"* on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Many Protestants somehow dismiss the letter of James as *"less qualified for theology"*. But I think that is a grave mistake, especially because it is very likely that James actually reacts on what Paul writes in Romans, not to contradict Paul's arguments, but to elaborate and clarify on it. And, if we take it's message seriously and read it carefully, we will be able to see exactly that.

James' argument about the relationship between faith and work are those ten verses in James 2:

**James 2:14:** *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters,<sup>[e]</sup> if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup> So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. <sup>18</sup> "But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. <sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. <sup>20</sup> Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?"*

The first thing that James establishes, is, *that faith without works is dead*. The rethorical question *"Can (that) faith save you?"* points to that fact. If you say you have faith but do not have works, you cannot expect *that faith* to save you. Faith by itself, without works is dead. What James means here, that mere *belief* does not save anyone. Merely believing, having a mental understanding about God or Jesus, is not enough to save someone. *Even the demons believe* in that sense of the word, says James in vers 19. And they are terrified of God and certainly will not be saved!

He then challenges the person, who says, *"You have faith and I have works."* He challenges a person to demonstrate his faith apart from works – how would anyone be able to do that? And then he says that the opposite is quite possible – by works one can demonstrate his faith. So works clearly can serve to demonstrate faith. Some Protestants use this part of James' argument to argue, that the whole point of James 2 is that works only serve to demonstrate *saving faith*. According to Martin Luther, *one is saved by faith alone, but true faith will never be alone* (but always be followed by works). But to conclude this is premature and we will have to look at the next verses carefully.

<sup>21</sup> *Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?* <sup>22</sup> *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.* <sup>23</sup> *Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to*

*him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."*

It is quite likely that this part of the letter of James is a reaction to what Paul writes about faith and works in Romans. They both quote Genesis 15:6 about the faith of Abraham. And that is also an important indication, that both Paul and James speak of *the same kind of justification*.

As we have seen, Genesis 15:6 happened years before Isaac was born, one could say in the middle of Abrahams life. God promised him to become the father of many nations, and Abraham believes God. This was credited to him as righteousness, as we have seen. And it was credited to him as righteousness *at that moment* (before Abrahams circumcision).

But now James says that Abraham was *justified by works*, when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. This happened many years after the faith of Abraham in Genesis 15:6. What is going on here?

James says, that Abraham's *faith is being made complete* by his works. This means that those "works" are a part of Abraham's faith, and without those works his faith was still incomplete.

And then James mentions, that the scripture "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*" *was fulfilled*. What does that mean? Let us see clearly how this is stated by James:

*"Faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6) was fulfilled."*

Which part of Genesis 15:6 is fulfilled? We know from Romans 4 that the moment that God "reckoned Abraham's faith to him as righteousness" already was fulfilled. That happened *when Abraham believed*, and before his circumcision. So the only thing left to be fulfilled is the part "*Abraham believed God*". So what James tells us here, that "*Abraham believed God*" was fulfilled when Abraham *completed his faith with his works*.

In that way, Abraham's "*completed faith*" justified him. But that completed faith *includes his works*. Or one could say his "*faith and works*" justified him.

So it is not just that *true faith leads to works* (that is what a Protestant would say). It is that faith is made *true faith* by works! And, James goes even further than that: he states that faith without works isn't even alive!

James 2, 26: "*Just as the body is dead without spirit, so faith without works is also dead.*" *Spirit gives life to a body, as works give life to faith*. When we have faith without works, something essential is missing: life. Starting to act on our faith and do what we know God wants us to do, makes our faith come alive. Works are therefore an essential part to alive faith.

But the point of all this is: works do really play a part in justification. And what's more: Abraham, who was justified when He believed God long before Isaac was born, was also justified by his faith and works at the very *end of his life*, which means: justification is a process. And that means that what emerges out of the letter of James, is the Catholic view: Justification is a *process*, and justification is by *faith and works*.

## **Protestant Objection: James just meant “Showing/proving to be righteous” with “justification”.**

One common objection of Protestants is that when James talks about justification he does not mean “being declared righteous” or “being made righteous”, he just means: “being shown to be righteous” or “proved to be righteous”.

So they would translate James 2 as follows:

*James 2:21: “Was not our ancestor Abraham shown to be righteous by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?”*

Now, the scope of different meanings for the word “dikaoō” do allow for this: “to affirm someone’s uprightness” or “to be proved to be righteous” are valid translations of the word.

But the problem with that interpretation is, that, if that would be the meaning of “justify” in verse 21, that also should be the meaning of “justify” in verse 24:

*James 2:24: “You see that a person is shown to be righteous by works and not by faith alone.”*

That would mean that James here actually talks about a person being *shown to be righteous by faith*. But *faith in itself being the sign of righteousness* is not at all what James has been talking about in his letter. Actually, it has been the other way around: a display of righteousness (by doing the right thing) is a sign of faith! (Verse 18: “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”). Neither is “faith being the sign of righteousness” a topic in the letters of Paul: faith is for Paul the *means* through which a person can become righteous, not some sign of inherent righteousness.

So this objection really does not make a lot of sense.

## **Romans 2 and Romans 1 – more evidence for justification by works**

We have set up our discussion of justification like an argument between Paul and James, but the letter of Romans itself contains quite some evidence for justification by works. I just wish to quote these verses without comment:

Romans 2:13 *“For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.”*

Romans 2:6-8: *“God will repay each person according to what they have done.”<sup>7</sup> To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.<sup>8</sup> But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.”*

Romans 1:5 *“Through him we have received grace and our apostolic commission to proclaim the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name.”*

## **“Works of the law” versus “Works of faith”**

Where does this lead us to? Somehow, we need to think “works” into our theology of “Justification”. And that will not prove to be that difficult at all. Let us just look at the apparent contradiction of James 2 and Paul 3:

**“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”**

**and**

**“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”**

We can avoid the inherent contradiction, if we assume, that the “works of the law” Paul speaks about is something different from the “works” James speaks about. And that is what we will consider now.

Paul’s letter to the Romans actually provides us with everything necessary to distinguish between “works of the law” and the works James talks about.

Paul has already established for us, that nobody can become righteous by works of the law. Every human being is naturally under the condemnation of the law. Nobody can keep the law perfectly, and therefore, nobody will become righteous by keeping the law. We are all sinners, and therefore condemned. In the *realm of the law*, all are sinners, and any work of the law is unable to justify us before God.

God’s solution to this situation is, that He now provides a righteousness, which is apart from the law, but through *faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe*. It is a justification by the *grace* of God as a *gift* to those who believe. Those who by faith have received the Holy Spirit are now placed into the *realm of the Spirit* (or the realm of grace).

Under the law, death exercises dominion, through sin, leading to condemnation and death. Under the Spirit grace exercises dominion, through righteousness, leading to justification and eternal life. (Romans 6:21)

Those that have been moved from under the law under grace, are now no longer slaves to sin, but have become slaves of righteousness. It works quite simple: as a slave to sin, one sins; as a slave to righteousness, one does what is right (Romans 6:15-18). Those that are under grace in the realm of the Spirit, are there so that the *just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in them* (Romans 8:3-4). These are the people, that become righteous and will do what is righteous.

What this all means is, that the *works of those who have faith*, those within the realm of the Spirit, are a *different* kind of works. They are not works done to *convince* God to *give* eternal life tho the believer who does them, but works as *a result* of the gift of eternal life. There is a different motivation behind these works: sometimes the motivation is *obedience*, sometimes the motivation is *thankfulness* and *love* for God and our fellow men.

One could call those works *works of faith*, to stress that they are done in simple obedience to God (for example Abraham’s decision to obey God to sacrifice Isaac).



One could call them *works of love*, to stress that they are done in love for God (for example "*feeding the hungry*", which James talks about).

Paul talks about these kind of works, when he says in the letter to the Galatians:

*Galatians 5:6 "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."*

Works of *love* or works of *faith*, the point is, that these works do justify the believer, they do make the believer righteous. Yes, one can say that those works are a result of the fact that God already has declared us righteous because of our faith, sure enough that is true. But by letting the Holy Spirit lead us to do what is right, we grow in holiness and righteousness. God's righteousness is by His Spirit more and more *infused* into our hearts.

While there is a difference in *motivation* between works of the law and works of faith, there is also a difference in *direction* between them.

Works of the law are essentially *self-righteous* works. By doing them we are pointing to ourselves, and what we are able to do. "*I am good enough, I do what is right!*" Self-righteousness is actually a sign of the unrighteousness of those who are under the law.

Works of faith/love do not give glory to ourselves, but to God. We do them because we believe in God, and what He can do. Think again about Abraham: He obeyed God, because he believed, that God even could raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill His promise to him! That is giving glory to God! Or we do them, because we love God, and love our fellow man, like when we give to those in need of food or clothes.

<b>Works of the law</b>	<b>Works of faith (or works of love)</b>
In the <i>realm of the law</i>	In the <i>realm of the Spirit/Grace</i>
Motivation: <i>convincing</i> God to give eternal life	Motivation: <i>obedience/love</i>
Cannot justify anyone	Do justify the believer
Giving glory to <i>ourselves</i>	Giving glory to <i>God</i>