

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 08, 2006

Faith w/ and w/o Works

Although it is an age-old problem repeatedly tackled by the great masters, I continue to bump into the question of faith and works. The question is put best in hermeneutical terms:

Paul says, "We are justified by faith, not by works lest any one should boast."

James says, "Faith without works is dead."

How do we reconcile these two statements?

As I see it, there are three alternative ways to tackle this problem.

1. Balance

The first is to assume that the differences between Paul and James are irreconcilable. We are thus in a position to choose between them or, better still, try to keep them in balance by our own theological ingenuity. This is just another "paradox of the faith" that we keep in tension. Although I am quite comfortable with acknowledging diversity and even divergence among the apostolic witnesses, I am suspicious of any solution that places all the weight on our own hermeneutical prowess. Yes, we must synthesize the canon. But we must be careful to not jump the gun. Perhaps the two statements will bear further analysis, rendering such a synthesis moot. This approach is just too easy for my taste. Such a balancing act glosses over the real problem by a lazy appeal to mystery. There must be a better way to lead us *into* the mystery of our faith, not just around it.

2. Emphasis

Another way to tackle the problem is to give pride of place to one statement over the other. Both are affirmed, but one as the primary statement and the other as a supplemental point. For instance, one

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might emphasize the Pauline "faith without works" formula, considering the Jacobean "dead faith" formula to block an antinomian misapplication of *sola fide*. Alternately, one might emphasize James' "faith plus works" formula, introducing Paul's concept of faith without works as a warning against a legalistic misunderstanding of the Christian life of good deeds. This is certainly a more subtle approach. It certainly attends to the differences while including the whole canon. The only problem is how to decide who gets pride of place. Certain traditions will obviously lean toward one or the other. But which way *should* we lean? There seems to be no Biblical warrant to prefer one over the other. So, once again we find ourselves back in the drivers' seat.

3. Analysis

Thankfully, there is a third way. Rather than balancing the difference or emphasizing one over the other, we can ask the analytical question: "What does each author mean by the word *faith*?" Although such an analysis does not always save the day, here it does. Why? Because the Greek word *pistis*, translated in both texts as "faith," has a wider range of meaning than any one English word can bear. *Pistis* can mean either (1) belief, (2) trust, or (3) faithfulness. Although it can mean any of these, it seldom means more than one at the same time. With this range of meaning in mind, let's look again at the two apparently contradictory statements, plugging in the definition most appropriate to the context:

Paul says, "We are justified by *trust*, not by works that any one should boast."

James says, "*Belief* without works is dead."

Despite the differences in their portrayals of the Christian life, Paul and James are not incompatible at this point. They are making two different claims about two very different matters. Paul is pushing us to trust in God for our justification, not our own works, which leads to a prideful attitude. James is telling us that simply believing God exists is not enough (even the demons do that!); we must pursue a life of good works. Both of these principles are true and good. They do not contradict because they are responding to different problems. Neither rules the other out, but both tell us much about how we are to live: trust God for our salvation, and live a life pleasing to him.

Thus by an analysis of the meaning of the faith, the two principles can be held together without irrational juxtaposition or arbitrary preference.

Any thoughts?

Do these seem to be the logical alternatives to dealing with this sort

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of problem?
 Are there others?
 Did I misrepresent any of the options?
 Is my account of faith's range of meaning accurate?
 What other matters might faith's range of meaning illuminate?
 Where else might this approach to apparent contradictions be used?
 Labels: [Christian Life](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:09 PM

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9 Comments:

At [12:51 AM, February 09, 2006](#), [kerry](#) said...

Thanks, John. I have never thought these were in conflict, but it was both/and. Your interpretation strengthens that conviction.

At [8:43 AM, February 09, 2006](#), [nate richardson](#) said...

i really like this concept. but i like the word faithfulness in the passage.

Paul says, "We are justified by faithfulness, not by works that any one should boast."

what do you think? or is faithfulness a part of works?

At [8:48 AM, February 09, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I've always seen it that we are saved by faith but if that faith doesn't influence how we act it's not really faith. It's not that there is a specific list of things we do to prove we have faith and somehow earn salvation it's just that a true faith in Christ goes deep enough to alter behavior. If I tell you the building is on fire I will know if you believe me not by what you say but by the fact that you get the heck out of the building. Our actions don't save us but they are the expectable response to what we believe.

At [4:42 PM, February 09, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

paul says we are JUSTIFIED by grace (not works).

james says faith without works is DEAD (not that we are "declared free of blame; absolved." or "freed of the guilt and penalty attached to grievous sin" by those works we are to be doing).

there is no conflict. james would agree we are not SAVED by our works, but if we have faith we will have works. i have never understood the supposed conflict here. James is not talking about salvation/justification but responsibility, isn't he?

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At [3:45 PM, February 10, 2006](#), [Josh](#) said...

John, I hear what you are saying, but I think that Paul and James are in the same type of mind set. They just say it in different ways. I am looking over what James says in the complete passage and I find a direct correlation with Paul in 1 Cor. 13. Paul says in verse 2, "...if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

I wonder if James is using works or deeds instead of love. You see in James 2:14-17 he is talking about someone being in need but just sending them off and wishing them well. Where is your faith showing in this circumstance? Where if you help them (or love them) you are showing them your faith. They work hand in hand. Faith and Love.

At [1:04 AM, February 11, 2006](#), [Tony Myles](#) said...

A plant grows through the soil - not through the sunlight. And yet a plant without sunlight is dead.

At [1:56 AM, February 13, 2006](#), [Summers](#) said...

Great stuff John! Your dad is right, whoever reads your posts should receive credit :)

Your analysis of these passages were both intriguing and convicting.

Hope all is going well!

-J-

side note: your critique on 'velvit elvis' and rob bell have given me much to think about (e.g. his views on church history, OT theology, etc.)

At [4:02 PM, February 13, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

John, this is one of my favorite textual studies. Every time I return to it I "struggle" with it. :) Just to present another option what if James isn't concerned with the issue of salvation at all, but proof and assurance of salvation. Is that possible? Taking what others said...true faith leads to works. So a lack of works proves you don't have faith (aren't saved)...doesn't it? What if?

Or maybe James just thinks of issues of salvation more along the lines of Christ's teachings. Live as though you are going to be judged according to the law of mercy...the one not showing mercy will receive judgment without mercy...Maybe James is saying if you want

to receive mercy, live a life of mercy and you will be measured with the measure you use. If you don't live a life of mercy it doesn't matter what kind of "belief" you have--you will be measured with your merciless measure. In other words it still isn't works...we are saved by God's mercy...but without our merciful works we won't receive God's mercy. Or is that Pelagian?

The above ramblings aside, I do think one thing... James is not saying exactly what Paul's epistles would say or we wouldn't need James in the canon. But they can be non-contradictory yet say radically different things in my opinion. And I think they do. Thanks for attending to this strawy epistle John,
Dave

p.s. What if works is the key word to study not faith? I think Dunn takes that angle.

At [7:26 PM, February 24, 2006](#), [jul](#) said...

1 John is also very helpful in understanding the relationship between faith and works. I've been studying this myself lately and am finding it very helpful to study Romans, Galations, and 1 John simultaneously, while cross-referencing other Scripture as well. The key thing to remember is that we live by the Spirit. He produces in us all kinds of good works and everything that pleases the Father. If we go back to trying to please God through obeying the law, we will fail. Whatever doesn't come from our faith in Christ is sin. (Romans 14:23) I could go on and on but I won't. I've written about this quite alot lately on my own blog, and am seeing more and more that this is an essential issue for us as believers. Thanks for writing about it.

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