

# Did Paul and James Contradict One Another?

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Paul wrote, *“For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness”* (Romans 4:2-3). James wrote, *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?”* (James 2:21).

Both passages mention Abraham. Paul implied that Abraham was justified without works, and James said he was justified by works. How, then, do we explain this? Either the Bible contradicts itself, or these two inspired men are speaking of two different types of works.

The following table proves that there are many different types of works mentioned in the Scriptures, so we must take into consideration what type of works are being discussed when we are reading:

<b>VARIOUS KINDS OF WORKS</b>	
<b>GOOD WORKS</b>	Matthew 5:16 Acts 9:36 Ephesians 2:10 Hebrews 10:24
<b>EVIL WORKS</b>	John 7:7 Romans 13:3 Colossians 1:21 1 John 3:12 James 3:16
<b>WORKS OF THE LAW OF MOSES</b>	Romans 3:20, 28-29; 7:7; 9:31-32; etc. Galatians 2:15-16
<b>WORKS OF THE FLESH</b>	Galatians 5:19-21
<b>WORKS OF THE DEVIL</b>	1 John 3:8
<b>MERITORIOUS WORKS</b>	2 Timothy 1:9 Titus 3:5
<b>WORKS OF DARKNESS</b>	Ephesians 5:11
<b>DEAD WORKS</b>	Hebrews 6:1; 9:14
<b>WORKS OF GODLY RIGHTEOUSNESS (OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW OF CHRIST)</b>	Matthew 7:21 John 6:28, 29 Acts 2:38; 6:7; 10:35, 48 Romans 1:5; 10:16; 16:26 Galatians 5:6; 6:2 2 Thessalonians 1:8 Hebrews 5:8, 9 1 Peter 1:22; 4:17

Whether inside or outside of the Bible, words like *“works”* can only be accurately defined by examining the context in which they are used. What is the context of what Paul wrote in Romans 4? The point Paul was making is that Abraham was justified without works of the Law

of Moses, and so must we be. The Jews of Paul's day had works, but now that Christ had come, the Jews needed to have faith in God's Son and stop trying to be justified by works of the Law of Moses. Paul actually used quite a bit of ink in the Epistle to the Romans trying to persuade Jews that they must die to the Law of Moses to be spiritually alive and without condemnation in Christ (Romans 7:1-7; 8:1-3; 10:1-21, etc.). The whole thesis of Romans is that the Gospel is the only way for men to be saved, whether Jews or Gentiles (1:16). Therefore Paul speaks against the immorality of the Gentiles (1:18-32), and against the Jews' adherence to the Old Law after it had been removed (Romans 2-11).

In James 2, James is showing that people who say they have faith, but have no works of obedience to Christ have a dead faith. James was not discussing works of obedience to the Old Law of Moses, but to what he called "*the Perfect Law of Liberty*" (James 1:25; 2:12), which he also called "*the Royal Law*" (James 2:8) of our King, Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:20; Revelation 17:14). A closer look at the verses surrounding James 2:21 help us understand James' point:

*But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only (James 2:20-24).*

Paul told us that Abraham was justified by faith apart from the Law of Moses, and James tells us that Abraham was justified by faith and declared righteous after he both believed God and demonstrated his faith by obedience.

Hebrews 11 is often called "The Faith Hall of Fame." It is filled with examples of those who obeyed because of their faith, and they were blessed after obedience. This writer knows of no person in the Bible who was blessed by God for his or her faith until evidence of that faith was demonstrated. Faith is demonstrated through obedience, like in Abraham, who "*by faith...went out, not knowing whither he went*" (Hebrews 11:8). The Bible plainly teaches that a person is not saved until he "*works righteousness*" (Acts 10:35), which means he obeys what God said he must do to be saved (Matthew 7:21; Acts 2:38-40; Romans 6:16-18; Hebrews 5:9; 1 Peter 1:22, etc.).

These concepts from other parts of the Bible do not contradict what Paul was teaching in Romans 4. Paul taught that works without faith are dead works, and James taught that faith without works is dead faith! Paul is not arguing against the necessity of obedience, and James is not arguing against the necessity of faith! Neither account is teaching that faith and all kinds of works are mutually exclusive—but rather they teach us the importance of faith in Jesus Christ and works of obedience to Christ. However, faith and works in Jesus Christ **do** exclude works of the Law of Moses for justification, which is what Paul taught in Romans (and Galatians, etc.).

Anyone who studies and rightly divides God's Word (2 Timothy 2:15) will see that Paul emphasized the necessity of obedience to Christ's Law, and also warned people not to live by Moses' Law (Romans 1:5; 2:5-10; 6:1-23; 10:1-3, 16; 16:26; 1 Corinthians 9:21; 15:58; Galatians 3:23-29; 5:3-6; 6:2; Philippians 2:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; etc.). Paul wrote that God will judge men by their "*deeds*" (works)—not simply what they believe (Romans 2:5-6; 2 Corinthians 5:10-11; 11:15). Paul said that God's grace teaches men to live obedient lives (Titus 2:11-12; cf. Acts 20:32). Paul said the only thing that will avail is "*faith which worketh by love*" (Galatians 5:6; emphasis JPH). Those who refuse to concede that Paul emphasized works of obedience to Christ for salvation should heed Peter's warning about twisting Paul's Scriptures to one's own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-18; cf. Acts 10:35; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Timothy 2:15).