

The Quandary of Faith Versus Good Works

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10, 14-17

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Here's a definition of the word "quandary": *a state of uncertainty or perplexity, especially as to what to do.* A synonym for the word quandary is the word "dilemma."

The little letter of James creates a theological quandary for some people, a state of uncertainty or perplexity. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther was one. He called James "a right strawy epistle" and argued that it did not belong in the New Testament. Too much emphasis on works, Luther said, and not enough emphasis on faith. James may create a theological quandary for some of us too. Like Luther, many of us in the Protestant tradition grew up on the theology of Paul, not James. Paul emphasizes our belief or faith in God, what we call orthodoxy, having right belief. Paul actually downplays good works. Here's what he wrote to the Ephesians,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works.

Paul at one time boasted of his Jewish heritage. He rattled off a litany of achievements of which he was rightly proud. He was circumcised on the appropriate day, in accordance with Jewish law. He traced his lineage back to the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Pharisee and was so zealous about his faith that he persecuted the early church. Paul at that time considered himself blameless. His good works were impeccable. Then he had the dramatic Damascus Road conversion experience. This is what he had to say then,

Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

This is how he explained it to the Galatians: “We know that a person is justified *not by the works of the law* but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

So Paul belonged squarely in the orthodoxy camp, having right belief, and that’s the theology many of us grew up with. We were taught to believe, to have faith that Jesus died on the cross. It was all a matter of believing that central truth, orthodoxy. We were taught that our best efforts, our best good works, were nothing more than filthy rags. That’s what Paul called them. It wasn’t wrong to do good works. But good works couldn’t save. We are saved by grace through faith—orthodox belief.

Then we met James and discovered that he comes from another perspective, what we call orthopraxy, having right practice. While Paul taught the importance of having faith, James taught that faith by itself is dead. Faith, he said, must be accompanied by good works.

So how do we resolve this quandary?

Tradition claims that James was the biological brother of Jesus, though solid scholarship cannot confirm that claim. This much is clear: the theology of James is right out of the parables of Jesus. Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan—an outcast who goes to great length to show loving kindness to an injured person. That’s orthopraxy, right practice. Jesus didn’t tell his followers to believe that parable. “Go and *do likewise*,” Jesus said.

You remember the Parable of the Great Judgment—“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And you remember Jesus’ answer, don’t you? “As you *did* it to one of the least of these my brethren, you *did* it to me.” Orthopraxy, right practice.

James gave his readers two examples. Say we’re in worship or Sunday School and a man walks in wearing gold rings and a tailor made suit—right out of *GQ* magazine. We stumble over ourselves trying to

welcome this man and escort him to the best seat. A little later another man walks in whose clothes are tattered and who smells as if he's not bathed in a while. We're not as quick to fawn over this man. Instead, we say to him, "Why don't you stand over there somewhere."

James says that kind of faith is deeply flawed. He says that we should show no partiality in welcoming those two men. James reminded his readers of the royal law, which he probably heard from Jesus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Or a woman comes in during the cold months. She is clearly inadequately dressed for the cold weather. You learn that she doesn't have adequate food. You say to her in your kindest, most eloquent southern drawl, "Why, bless your little heart, honey. Now, you stay warm tonight and eat a hearty meal." You've been nice, right? Nice is good, but you didn't respond to her real needs. James says that kind of faith is deeply flawed and asks this question, "What is the good of that?" Then he drops the bomb: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

It is the theological quandary of faith versus good works. Which is more important? Who is right—Paul or James?

Here's what I've decided. We don't have to choose between the two. A holistic approach blends Paul and James. Real faith naturally issues into good works. If we blend Paul and James, perhaps their combined teaching would be something like this:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works. But do good works anyway because a good work was done for you by Jesus Christ.

So you're sitting in Sunday worship, and a man wearing gold rings and a tailor made suit walks in. Right behind him enters the man in tattered clothes who maybe hasn't bathed in a while. You don't notice at first because you are focused on preparing yourself for worship. It is your practice to take a few moments before worship to settle yourself and open yourself to God, to be available to the real presence of God in worship. Then you notice the two men. During the time of greeting, you

go to the men and extend a heartfelt welcome to each. No partiality. You show honor to each of them.

Then you see the woman who is inadequately clothed. It's cold outside. You don't have time to address her needs during the greeting, but you make a mental note to locate her after worship. You do, and you're able to give her more than a heartfelt welcome.

This theological quandary is resolved by blending faith with good works. Real faith naturally issues into good works.

This is happening in Lincoln Village, an old mill village downtown. We have a crew of men and women working on Thursday and Saturday mornings rehabbing affordable housing. They are part of a movement that has taken a drug infested community riddled with dilapidated houses and turned it into a thriving community of decent, affordable housing. Faith that naturally issues into good works.

This Tuesday at 9 a.m. people will start packing backpacks for about 450 students of one of our Title 1 schools. These backpacks will provide the students with food for the week of fall break. Faith that naturally issues into good works.

So let's try not to see a quandary here. Let's see this text as a challenge, a challenge to put our faith to work, to find a place where we can turn our orthodoxy into orthopraxy. Have you found your place?

Closing Prayer

Lord, you have performed good works for us through Jesus Christ. We believe in that story. Help us to share it with others by doing good works for them. Amen.