



The Biggest 'Contradiction' in the Bible

When people criticise the Bible, they often point to 'contradictions'. 'The Bible says this here, but says the opposite over here!' This proves, they say, that this cannot be God's book; it's no different from any other human book with the usual errors and mistakes.

Usually it's quite easy to show that these are only 'seeming' contradictions. If we interpret God's Word correctly, we will usually be able to show how both verses or passages are true.

However, sometimes it's not so easy. Sometimes it's very hard. Sometimes it looks almost impossible. One of these 'impossible' passages is James 2:24, probably the biggest 'contradiction' in the Bible. Let me state this problem as clearly as I can. In at least three places in Romans alone the Apostle Paul says that we are saved by faith alone without works (Rom. 3:20, 28; 5:1).

But when we turn to James we read: By works a man is justified, and not by faith only (Jas. 2:24).

The problem is obvious, isn't it? Many verses in the Bible teach that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. But James says that faith alone without works is not enough.

High Stakes

The stakes are very high here, because it's not just a minor matter about the numbers of soldiers in Israel's army; it's about the most important matter of all – how sinners are saved.

Can these opposing statements be reconciled? I believe they can, and the key is to understand that although Paul and James both speak of justification, they are speaking about two different kinds of justification.

This isn't some kind of verbal trickery, making words mean just what we want them to mean depending on what we want to believe. No, words only have meaning in relation to other words. We need to look at the surrounding words to figure out what each word means. The surroundings make all the difference.

For example, if you're fishing in a boat and someone says, 'Will you get off the net?' you look around your feet to see if you are standing on the landing net. But if you're sitting at a computer and Dad says to you, 'Will you get off the net?' you're looking for the 'Close Browser' button. It is the same word, but the different surroundings make the word mean something completely different.

Surroundings

So what are the surroundings of 'justification' in Romans and James?

In Romans the context is our standing before God, God's view and verdict upon us. In that sense, God justifies us by our faith; He counts us as righteous because of the faith that He alone can see.

In James the context is our standing before people, their view and verdict upon us. In that sense, people justify us by our works; they conclude we are righteous because of the good works they see in our lives (they are unable to see if faith is just in our hearts).

The whole letter of James is about practical Christianity – how we are to live out our faith. Chapter 1 covers doing, not just hearing the word (v 22), care for orphans and widows and keeping

ourselves unspotted from the world (v 27). Chapter 2 says '*Stop being snobs and start treating rich and poor alike*' (vv. 1-13). Chapter 3 is about the way we use our tongues, chapter 4 addresses relational conflict, and chapter 5 calls us to deal fairly with our employees and pay our bills on time. It's all about the visible practice of Christianity.

No Surprise

No surprise then that when we come to the latter part of chapter 2, James is utterly focused on the need for faith to produce works, fruit, public profit, evidence of spiritual life, etc. It's not about our relationship to God but our relationship to other people. It's not about how God sees us but how people see us. It's not about how we get spiritual life, but how we demonstrate that we have it.

The biggest contradiction is not Romans v James. The biggest contradiction, says James, is a Christian without good works.

David Murray

©2017
www.christianstudylibrary.org