



THE *Jesus*
CODE



52 Scripture
Questions Every Believer
Should Answer

O. S. Hawkins

50 WHAT DOES IT PROFIT, MY BRETHREN, IF SOMEONE SAYS HE HAS FAITH *but* DOES NOT HAVE WORKS? CAN FAITH SAVE HIM?

—JAMES 2:14



*T*hroughout Christian history, people have tried to pit Paul, with his emphasis on grace, against James, with his emphasis on works. The apparent conflict has been presented like the main event of a heavyweight prizefight: “In this corner, wearing the grace trunks, is the apostle Paul, born in Tarsus, educated by the renowned Gamaliel, and the undisputed brilliant mind of this new movement called Christianity! He says, ‘By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God’ (Ephesians 2:8). And in the other corner, wearing the works trunks is James, the son of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth, converted after the resurrection of Jesus, and known as the respected leader of the Jerusalem church! He teaches, ‘Faith without works is dead’ (James 2:26).” In some Christian circles, the prizefight between faith and works continues two thousand years later.

The ongoing debate over the nature of salvation tends to gravitate toward two extremes. One school of thought is often referred to as “easy believism.” This overemphasis on



faith and underemphasis on fruit, or works, leads some to say that people can pray a simple “sinner’s prayer” when they are children, live the rest of their days with no desire whatsoever for spiritual things, and still be saved from the consequences of their sin and God’s wrath to come. The other extreme overemphasizes works and underemphasizes faith. This ideology teaches that it is faith plus something else (like baptism or some other kind of human effort) that saves. Still other Christians believe God has some type of huge scale, and they hope that when the final bell rings, their good works will outweigh their bad, and all will end well.

Let’s get inside the ring with Paul and James, between grace and works, and see if we can determine the winner.

ROUND ONE: PAUL ON THE OFFENSE

Paul begins with a left jab: he says, “For by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:8). He plunges right into the fight insisting that salvation is *God’s work*, that salvation is “by grace.” God’s gift of salvation is not in response to any of our human efforts. It originates with Him, not with man. Our salvation is by grace, a word that can be defined as “getting what we don’t deserve.” Again, Paul taught that grace is “the gift of God” (v. 8), a blessing freely given by the Father, a blessing that can never be earned.

As quick as a flash Paul strikes again with a right cross to the chin when he explains that salvation is *God’s work in God’s way*. Paul insists that salvation comes “through faith, and that not of yourselves” (v. 8). Salvation is God’s work, and it must



be accomplished in God's way, which is through faith in Jesus Christ. Even as I type these words, I find myself wanting to shout, "*By faith! Not of yourselves! Not of works! The gift of God!*"

Do you realize that there are only two religions in the whole world? They are true religion and false religion. True religion originates in Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

Paul, sensing an opportunity, now delivers an uppercut: "Salvation is *God's work in God's way according to God's will.*" Paul continues, "For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). God created each one of us unique, His own one-of-a-kind work of art; no one else on the planet has DNA like yours. And that is not all: God prepared us "beforehand," back in the eternal recesses of time. So Paul makes a strong case for grace. James seems to be on the ropes.

ROUND TWO: JAMES COUNTERS

James stands his ground. He is now toe-to-toe with Paul. He counters, "A faith without fruit is a *false faith.*" More specifically, James asks, "What good is it if you say you have faith and have not works? Can this kind of faith save you?" (James 2:14, paraphrased).

With lightning speed he keeps coming: "Faith without fruit is not only false faith; it is also *futile faith.*" Then James



issues this challenge: “You say you have faith. Show me! Even the demons believe and tremble” (vv. 18–19, paraphrased).

James stands his ground now. He continues, “A faith without fruit is also a *fatal faith*.” He explains this important point: “Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is DOA, dead on arrival” (vv. 20–26, paraphrased).

THE FINAL BELL

When the bell rings, both Paul and James are still standing. In fact, they are actually hugging each other. Then, at the same moment, they grab the other’s arm and lift it high in victory. They both win! How? Because in the final analysis, these two men of God are saying the same thing. The judges determine that Paul is saying what James is saying: “We are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works!*” (Ephesians 2:10, emphasis added). And James is saying what Paul is saying: “Of [God’s] own will He brought us forth [chose us] by the word of truth” (James 1:18). The teachings of these men of God complement each other; they are not contradictory.

Paul was primarily writing to the Judaizers, those people of the Jewish faith who had infiltrated the early church with their false teaching that people had to add to faith works that were in line with ancient Jewish law in order to be saved. In response, Paul emphasized the primacy of faith: salvation is wholly by grace and through faith alone. James, on the other hand, was writing primarily to people who went to the far extreme of grace and insisted that they could live any way they wanted as long as they “believed.” Thus James’s emphasis was



on what our Lord called the fruit of our faith. What evidence of your faith do others see in your life?

So faith *and* works walk out of the ring arm in arm. That is as it should be, because this fight about the Christian life is not about faith *and* works but about a faith *that* works. Thus works are never a requirement for our salvation; works are the result of our salvation. Yes, it is faith alone that saves, but faith that saves is never alone! Faith that saves is never isolated from works.



Q & A: “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” The question is not whether faith can save us or not, but whether a faith that never produces what our Lord called the “fruit of the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:9) can save us. The real issue is not about faith *and* works, but a faith *that* works!

