

Yesterday I began answering a question about the New Testament book of James. The most interesting thing about the book, for most readers, is that it *seems* at least to be attacking a view vigorously espoused by the apostle Paul. Are these authors at odds with each other? Here is where I pick up on that discussion in my book *Forged*. My sense is that a lot of readers of the blog will not anticipate where I stand on the issue.

There is one issue that the author is particularly concerned with, however. It is an issue that reflects a bone of contention with other Christians. There are some Christians who are evidently saying that to be right with God, all one needs is faith; for them, doing “good works” is irrelevant to salvation, so long as you believe. James thinks this is precisely wrong, that if you do not do good deeds, then you obviously don’t have faith.

What use is it, my brothers, if a person says he has faith but has no works? Is faith able to save him? If a brother or sister is naked and has no daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and be filled,” without giving them what their bodies need, what use is that? So also faith, if it does not have works, is dead, being by itself. (James 2:14-17)

The author goes on to argue that having faith apart from works cannot bring salvation, and in fact is worthless. This is shown above all by the example of Abraham, father of the Jews, who was saved by what he did, not just by what he believed.

But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from works and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one? You do well: even the demons believe, and they shudder. But do you wish to know, O shallow man, that faith apart from works is barren? Wasn’t Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works and faith was completed by the works. And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” And he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works, and not by faith alone. (James 2:18-24)

Here then is a sharp invective against anyone who maintains that it is faith alone that can put a person into a right standing before God (in James’s words, that can “justify” a person). His evidence is Abraham, and the Scripture he quotes in support is Genesis 15:6: “And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

One of the reasons this passage is significant is that it sounds almost like a parody of something that Paul himself wrote, earlier, in his letter to the Galatians, when he ...

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