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PAUL AND JAMES ON JUSTIFICATION

Paul's language in Romans and Galatians is very explicit – justification is by faith alone. But what about that statement in James 2:24? "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." There seems to be a glaring contradiction between Paul and James. Some have even said that James is specifically refuting Paul's teaching. A careful examination of James will reveal that there is no contradiction between the two. Having said this, we must, however, be aware of a *false* harmonization. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, likewise seeks to bring both texts into harmony with their two-fold justification. They consider the first justification (Paul's teaching), to be an infusion of grace and a renewal of life in the new birth. The second justification (James' teaching), they consider to be growth in the grace of justification in which, by means of works and merits, Christians grow (by sanctification) in their justification. In this scheme, sanctification is unto justification. We are compelled to confront this objection because it is central to the continuing polemic of the Roman Catholic Church against the doctrine of free justification. It has been a standard part of Roman Catholic teaching from the time of the Reformation that the doctrine of free justification dangerously undermines the necessity and importance of good works in the Christian life. The doctrine of free justification, so it is argued, represents a kind of "legal fiction": God regards us "as if" we were righteous, when in fact we remain sinners as we were before. According to this complaint, sinners, when they are saved, are not really changed by God's grace, and their lives undergo no real amendment. The charge that free justification (*sola fide*) is a kind of "legal fiction," continues to be made by contemporary Roman Catholic apologists, who argue that in justification we actually do become righteous and this increases progressively until we are completely justified (after a period of time in purgatory). This is how Karl Keating states it, "The Roman Catholic Church, not surprisingly, understands justification differently. It sees it as a true eradication of sin and a true sanctification and renewal. The soul becomes objectively pleasing to God and so *merits* heaven. It merits heaven because now it is actually good"¹ (my emphasis). The position of Eastern Orthodoxy is likewise deficient, as Leonardo De Chiriconone points out: "Justification has never received much attention in Eastern Orthodox theology. The orthodox view of salvation is largely shaped by the idea of theosis based on such texts as 2 Peter 1: The word theosis is translated *deification* in English, and the concept is very problematic, biblically speaking. It stems from a flawed view of the gravity of sin and results in a blurred view of salvation. By thesis the Orthodox mean the process of becoming godly with the help of grace. The emphasis is put on the synergistic process by which we contribute to our becoming holy by cooperating with grace. Yet, biblically speaking, it is by trusting in Christ's merit alone, not in our cooperation or effort, that we are justified. Orthodoxy's emphasis on deification to the virtual exclusion of justification creates serious problems if seen from a biblical point of view. Justification (as God's declaration that we sinners are righteous because we have been credited with Christ's righteousness by faith alone) is not simply a Western idea whose origins lies in our legal way of seeing reality, as the Orthodox often repeat. It is the central message of the gospel regarding how we are saved (by faith alone) and on what basis (Christ's righteousness imputed to us)."²

A number of high-profile evangelicals, like John Armstrong (under the influence of N. T. Wright and Norman Shepherd), now suggest that this historic debate needs to be revisited with the not so subtle suggestion that the Reformers emphasis on *Sola fide* needs to be corrected by the insights of the so-called New Perspective on Paul.³ Norman Shepherd, a self-professed “Reformed” theologian actually sides with Rome in his interpretation of James.⁴ Shepherd has gone on record rejecting the imputation of Christ’s active obedience and in fact presents what can only be described as an implicit endorsement of the Roman Catholic position that righteousness is infused as the basis for justification since in Shepherd’s view saving faith in justification is *not* contemplated apart from obedience in life. Rich Lusk, one of the Federal Vision advocates puts it rather bluntly, “Final justification, however, is according to works. This pole of justification takes into account the entirety of our lives -- the obedience we’ve performed, the sins we’ve committed, the confession and repentance we’ve done. At the last day our works will not have any meritorious value. In that sense, even before the great white judgment throne, we will plead nothing but the blood and resurrection of Jesus. We will place no confidence in anything we have accomplished -- even what God has done in us and through us! Nevertheless, God’s verdict over us will be in accord with, and therefore in some sense based upon, the life we have lived.”⁵ The Reformers rightly rejected this notion of infused righteousness and adamantly argued that the Bible taught imputation. When God justifies us upon the basis of the righteousness of Christ that He grants and imputes to us. Not surprisingly Shepherd and Lusk both reject the Reformed doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience (and Lusk goes even further, he denies the imputation of Christ’s passive obedience as well).⁶

I. **THE SCOPE AND DESIGN OF JAMES.** James’ scope is totally different from Paul’s as a reading of the context makes clear. James is not dealing with the meritorious ground of justification -- Paul is. James is contending with a type of antinomianism, which in effect is reducible to what we would call *easy-believism*. At this point, it may be remembered that both Martin Luther and John Calvin responded rather explicitly to the Roman Catholic analysis of these assertions of James. As Calvin says: “That we may not then fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists [the Romanists], we must take notice of the two-fold meaning of the word *justified*. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before men, as we may gather from the preceding words, *Show me thy faith.*”⁷

- A. **What Does James Mean by Faith?** Everything hinges on how this word is being used by James. Note the context: “If a man *claims* to have faith . . .” (2:14). The word-translated *claim* in the NIV is *legei*, which means *to say* or simply *profess*. The same thought is stated again in verse 19. “You *believe* that there is one God. Good! Even the demons *believe* that—and shudder.” In this context, the word *believe* is being used in the sense of *affirmation* or *assent*. It is what I would call *head-nodding* faith. “What Paul means by faith is something entirely different; it is not mere intellectual assent to certain propositions, but an attitude of the entire man by which the whole life is entrusted to Christ. In other words, the faith that James is condemning is not the faith that Paul is commending.”⁸
- B. **What Does James Mean by Works?** Again, we need to carefully distinguish what James means by works and what Paul means. Paul is referring to those things, which are intended to earn or merit salvation by human effort. James is talking about that which is the *fruit* of faith, that which is evidence of genuine faith (which Paul likewise alludes to in Galatians 5:21).
- C. **What Does James Mean by Justify?** James’ meaning is clear from his illustration of Abraham. Note that this is drawn from Genesis 22. Abraham’s act in that passage is the demonstration of what is stated in Genesis 15:6. “The statement of Genesis 15:6 is seen as fulfilled, completed, incarnated in the concrete reality of Abraham’s obedience of Genesis 22.”⁹

But Rich Lusk disagrees with this interpretation (and with Calvin and Machen). He declares, “[It] cannot be referring to a *demonstration* of justification, e.g., justification does [not] and cannot mean something like “show to be justified.” Rather, James has in view the same kind of justification as Paul -- forensic, soteric justification. Good works justify *persons* in James 2, not *faith* or one’s *status* as a justified sinner. James is not telling his readers how to “justify their justification” or how to “give

evidence of a true and lively faith.” Instead he says their persons will *not* be justified by faith alone, but *also* by good works of obedience they have done. The use of the preposition “by” is important since it indicates a sort of dual instrumentality in justification. In other words, in some sense, James is speaking of a justification in which faith and works combine together to justify. Future justification is according to one’s life pattern. No one dare claim these works to be meritorious, but they are necessary.”¹⁰ Lusk badly butchered James with this interpretation. Note: James does NOT mention “Justify” as it relates to the Person and work of Christ -- he doesn’t mention Christ at all in this passage! Whereas in Paul, Christ is at the very center of his description of justification.

CONCLUSION: Accordingly, we may conclude that the term *justify* in James 2 has, to use the language of theology, a probative or demonstrative meaning. Such a meaning is in harmony with the question posed in these verses, namely, how the genuineness of faith is manifested before others. That’s also why James concludes this appeal to Abraham by saying “and the Scripture was fulfilled.” Abraham’s act of faith in being willing to sacrifice Isaac, which is recorded in Genesis 22, was a fulfillment, a confirmation, of what was earlier declared about him in Genesis 15:6. Though Abraham was justified by faith alone, the faith by which he was justified proved itself genuine in his act of obedience. His obedience was the *fruit* of his trust in God (and not, as Shepherd contends, the grounds for his justification). James, contrary to Roman Catholic teaching, does *not* teach that Abraham’s faith in Genesis 15:6 was at first imperfect, incomplete and then gradually, was progressively made full by his works. Genesis 22 gave evidence that Abraham’s faith was real faith and had always been the right kind of faith and so was completed. Faith, in the Biblical sense is *always* validated as a *living* faith, *e.g.*, it is fruitful and productive. If there had been no fruit forthcoming, Abraham’s faith would not have been genuine and would not have counted for anything to begin with. “In short,” writes Warfield, “James is not depreciating faith: with him, too, it is faith that is reckoned unto righteousness (2:23), though only such a faith as shows itself in works can be so reckoned, because a faith which does not come to fruitage in works is dead, non-existent. He is rather deepening the idea of faith and insisting that it include in its very conception something more than an otiose intellectual assent.”¹¹ Garry Wills is an accomplished historian who has written a number of helpful books, but his book *What Paul Meant* is not one of them. Willis claims that, “The heart of the problem is this. Paul entered the bloodstream of Western civilization mainly through one artery, the vein carrying a consciousness of sin, of guilt, of the tortured conscience. This is the Paul we came to know through the brilliant self-examinations of Augustine and Luther, of Calvin and Pascal and Kierkegaard. The profound writings of these men and their followers, with all their vast influence, amount to a massive misreading of Paul, to a historic misleading of the minds of people down through the centuries.”¹² What Willis objects to in his analysis boils down to his personal distaste for the doctrines espoused by Augustine, Luther, Calvin and company, *i.e.*, original sin, total depravity, unconditional election being the most obvious. And what does that actually amount to? Pelagianism in one form or another. Listen carefully to the wisdom of William Huntington (1745-1813), a contemporary of John Newton: “Every essential truth that we part with is an infinite loss; and we daily see an awful departure from the doctrines of the gospel. Errors gain ground; and champions for the truth are but few in number when compared to the other host. If thou art a child of God by faith, see to the groundwork of it. Hast thou the faith of God’s elect? let election be its basis. Hast thou a justifying faith? let imputed righteousness be its basis. Hast thou a victorious faith? thy victory lies in a Saviour’s arms. Hast thou a purifying faith? then faith fetches its purifying efficacy from a Saviour’s blood. Give up none of these truths; for, if we think truth is not worth contending for, we may expect the Spirit to clap his wings, and take his flight from us.”¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ K. Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 167. Another Roman Catholic writer puts it this way, “Man, for his part, in order to arrive at full sanctification, must cooperate with the grace of the Holy Spirit through faith, hope, love of God and neighbor, and prayer; but he must also perform other ‘works.’ It is a universally accepted dogma of the Catholic Church that man, in union with the grace of the Holy Spirit must merit heaven by his good works. These works are meritorious only when they are performed in the state of grace and with a good intention...We have shown that according to Holy Scripture

the Christian can actually merit heaven for himself by his good works.” Matthias Premm, *Dogmatic Theology for the Laity* (Tan Books, 1977), p. 262. I want you to note how similar the Roman Catholic position is with the views of Norman Shepherd and The Federal Vision (who claims to be “Reformed!”). More recently, Stephen Wood, a convert from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism, likewise admitted that merit is involved with justification. He relays a conversation he had with John Gerstner (R.C. Sproul’s mentor) over the concept of merit. “Dr. Gerstner was adamant that any type of merit associated with justification nullifies grace. I responded by again asking, *How can a gracious reward to a justified person, based on a good work empowered by grace, nullify grace?* The bulk of our time together was spent going back and forth on merit. I asserted that merit was simply one of the aspects of grace in our salvation. Dr. Gerstner continued to stress that merit nullified grace. Dr. Gerstner was the perfect model of a Christian gentleman throughout our debate on justification. But at the end of our conversation, Dr. Gerstner warned me, in a manner as kind as possible, that I would go to hell if I followed through with my decision to become a Catholic and persisted in my beliefs on merit. Looking back on our conversation more than twenty-five years later, I believe I made a mistake in under-emphasizing the framework of God’s fatherhood when discussing merit in justification.” Cf. S. Wood, *Grace & Justification: An Evangelical’s Guide to Catholic Beliefs* (Family Life Center Publications, 2017), p. 78. Romans 11:6 seems pretty clear, “But if it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” Robert Rollack (1555-1599) carefully noted, “For from the position of works, the conclusion is a denial of grace or of gracious election. Therefore, by equal reason, from the position of grace the conclusion is a denial of works. *Otherwise*. He teaches that the denial of grace obtains from the position of works, as above, from the inconvenience that follows the conclusion contradicting this, namely, the affirmation of grace. Moreover, it is an inconvenience, because a work would no longer be a work, if from that having been established, the consequence were grace. For now, its nature having been changed, it would escape into the nature of its consequence, namely, grace, and he would no longer procure the benefit from debt. For it is the benefit of a work to obtain from debt, not graciously. From this we see that grace and works are so contrary that one obtains from the other, or one cannot be united with the other, unless the nature of the other is indicated. Therefore, it is necessary that that grace by which God chose us, by which He calls us, et cetera, be merely gracious, and the Papists dream up whatever sort at last has been knit together between grace and works as it were. Robert Rollack’s commentary on Romans (Casey Carmichael, 2025), p. 236.

² Leonardo De Chiriconone, *Rome, the East, and the Ancient Tradition of the Church*, Tabletalk (December, 2025), 17.

³ Cf. J. Armstrong’s Introduction in *Reformation & Revival Journal: Justification: Modern Reflection* (Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 2002), p. 8. G. & P. Waters correctly points out that the Soteriological (justification) sympathies of Wright and Shepherd are *not* with the Reformers but with Roman Catholicism. Cf. his *Justification and The New Perspectives on Paul* (P&R, 2004), pp. XI, 210.

⁴ Cf. N. Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (P&R, 2004), pp. XI, 210.

⁵ As cited by G. P. Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology* (P&R, 2006), p. 90.

⁶ Lusk declares, “justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons; Debating the Federal Vision* (Knox Seminary, 2004), p. 142.

⁷ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries III* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 286.

⁸ *J. Gresham Machen’s Notes on Galatians*, ed. John Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 220. In order to completely capture the Biblical understanding of faith, the Reformers spoke of faith in a three-fold sense. First, faith must rest on knowledge. It must have content. This they called *notitia* (English words like *notice*, *notify* and *cognitive* are derived from this Latin word). Faith must involve the mind, but not merely in terms of information. It must include *assent* or agreement as a necessary component. This is *assensus*. But by far the most important element of *fides* (faith) is what the Reformers called *fiducia*, which simply translated means *trust* (words like *fiducial* and *fidility* are derived from this). Thus when the Reformers referred to *Sola Fides*, they had in mind this three-fold understanding of the word *Fides*. Calvin wrote, “We shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely-given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” Calvin emphasizes what is stated by Paul in Romans, namely, that true faith is in God’s freely offered salvation through the work of Christ. But he adds, as Paul suggests in Ephesians 2:8-10 though not in Romans 3, that this is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. As cited in J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expositional Commentary* 1 (Baker, 1991), p. 388.

⁹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 136.

¹⁰ As cited by Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, p. 90. It should be pointed out that Lusk has gone on to say things like, “For better and for worse, we have numerous popularizers of Reformed theology around today. The result is that what most of us think of as *Reformed* is greatly truncated. American Reformed theology is like a bad cassette recording of the real thing. In this essay (and in this book as a whole), we are simply trying to recover nuances that were originally in the tradition, but have been lost.” *The Federal Vision*, eds. S. Wilkins and D. Garner (Athanasian Press, 2004), p. 297. I need to mention that Mr. Lusk has NO formal theological training (no Bible College, no seminary), yet that does not stop him from making this kind of sophomoric remark!

¹¹ B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), p. 416.

¹² G. Willis, *What Paul Meant* (Viking, 2006), p. 172.

¹³ *The Works of William Huntington*, IV (rpt. J. R. Broome, 1989), p. 199.

