

Faith Alone and Faith and Works: An Orthodox Christian Approach



St. James (in Greek, Iakovos), the Brother of God

One often hears it said that we are "saved by faith alone." However, the only place in the New Testament where the phrase "faith alone" is actually used is in the Letter of James 2:24, where the Scriptures say precisely the opposite: "that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." The entire context of that passage is given below, translated from the original Greek:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no works? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to him, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but gives him nothing for his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, **faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by works, is dead.**

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith; I have works." **Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.**

¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰You foolish man, do you want evidence that **faith without works is useless?**

²¹Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for his works when he offered his

son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his works were working together, and his faith was made complete by his works. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴**You see that a person is justified by his works and not by faith alone.**

²⁵In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so **faith without works is dead.**

So, if James 2:24 is the only place in the New Testament where the phrase "faith alone" is actually used and it has the opposite meaning than what is normally given it by, for example, many Protestant, evangelical and non-denominational Christians, where did their understanding of the phrase initially come from and who made it into a slogan? The answer: Martin Luther, the 16th century Reformer.

Martin Luther, in his German translation of the Bible – a translation that had as powerful an impact on the German language as the King James Version had on English – inserted the word "alone" (*allein* in German) in Romans 3:28 making the text read: ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith (*alone*) apart from works of the law.

Roman Catholic scholars of the 16th century knew this word was not in the original Greek text of Romans 3:28 and took Martin Luther to task for this intentional mistranslation. Father Georges Florovsky, a patristics scholar and well-known Orthodox theologian of the last century who taught at Harvard and Princeton and was the dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary in the 1950's, wrote the following about this Reformation controversy: "Luther even added the word "alone"—*allein*—in Romans 3:28 before "through faith" precisely to counter the words in James 2:24: "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." What is more is that Luther became very aggressive and arrogant in his response to the criticism that he had added "alone" to the Biblical text. "If your papist makes much useless fuss about the word *sola, allein*, tell him at once: Doctor Martin Luther will have it so and says: Papist and donkey are one thing; *sic volo, sic jubeo, sit pro ratione voluntas*. For we do not want to be pupils and followers of the Papists, but their masters and judges." Luther continues in a bantering manner in an attempt to imitate St. Paul in the latter's response to his

opponents in the Corinthian correspondence (2 Corinthians 11:22-23): "Are they doctors? So am I. Are they learned? So am I. Are they preachers? So am I. Are they theologians? So am I. Are they philosophers? So am I. Are they writers of books? So am I. And I shall further boast: I can expound Psalms and Prophets; which they cannot. I can translate; which they cannot . . . Therefore the word *allein* shall remain in my New Testament, and though all pope-donkeys should get furious and foolish, they shall not get the word out." In some German editions the word "*allein*" was printed in larger type!"



St. Paul the Apostle

St. Paul, in discussing the basis for our judgment by God on the last day, says in Romans 2:6 that "God will give to each person according to his works." The passage in its context is given below:

⁶God "will give to each person according to his works." ⁷To those who by persistence in good works seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰but glory, honor and peace for everyone who works for the good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹For God does not show favoritism.

Interestingly enough, in both the Letter of James 2:14-26 and at Romans 2:6-11, the New International Version, a translation done by evangelical Protestant scholars in the 1970's and the most popular translation of the

Bible in the United States today, does not consistently translate the Greek word *erga* as "works," as I've done above. More often than not, the word is translated as "deeds" or by the phrase "by what he has done." In effect, this ideological bias in translation downplays the close connection between faith and works drawn by both the apostles James and Paul.

Do Orthodox Christians believe that we're saved by grace through faith? Yes, of course we do! St. Paul says so in his Letter to the Ephesians 2:4, 8-9. But we do not separate faith and works. Notice that even here, where St. Paul says that we are "saved by grace," he goes on to say that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works." As is so often the case, we need to read the rest of the passage.

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God's workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Now, what does St. Paul mean here when he says that we are saved "not by works" and then in the very next verse says that we are "to do good works"? What are the "works" and what are the "good works" he is speaking of?

Orthodox Christians understand the word "works" in this passage to refer to "the works of the Law" of the Old Testament as St. Paul says below in Galatians 2:16 as found in the NIV translation:

¹⁶ we know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Again, what's here translated as "observing the Law" in the NIV is translated as "works of the Law" in the New King James and New Revised Standard Versions, and this phrase "works of the Law" is what the original Greek actually says. "Works of the Law" is here a reference to the ritual injunctions required by the Law of the Old Testament such as circumcision, keeping a kosher household, etc. It is not a reference to the moral life, to doing good works.

Father Ted Stylianopoulos, the long-time professor of New Testament at Holy Cross, our seminary in Boston, commenting on Galatians writes:

"St. Paul's whole point here is that the Galatian Christians had begun to practice Jewish customs like circumcision – not that they were overly ethical, something which St. Paul requires as intrinsic to the Christian life (Galatians 5:16-6:10). Overall, in his letters, St. Paul speaks of three kinds of works:

1.) *works of the flesh*, that is, sinful attitudes and deeds (Galatians 5:19; Romans 13:12; 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11);

2.) *works of the Law*, that is, the ritual injunctions of the Mosaic Law like circumcision that are no longer necessary for salvation (Galatians 2:3, 12-16; 4:10; 5:2);

3.) *good works*, that is, moral and ethical deeds (Romans 2:16, 21-26; Galatians 6: 7-10) on the basis of which Christians – and all people – will be judged by God (1 Corinthians 6: 9-10; Galatians 5:21; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Thus, Paul's contrast between faith and works fundamentally concerns faith in Christ and specifically what he calls "works of the Law," namely the ritual law of the Old Testament, not the moral commandments of the Old Testament which remain valid and are fulfilled by Christ. Still, salvation is indeed "by grace...through faith" in Christ and it is a "gift of God". Faith in Christ and good works are integrated, not contrasted – much less opposed to one another – by St. Paul who everywhere exhorts and demands moral and ethical obedience to God as a necessary component of the Gospel. Paul teaches not only justification by faith but also judgment by the criterion of good works."

