

“Faith without works is dead”—James 2:26

In our [previous article on salvation](#), we established that the Bible does not support the eternal salvation (or “once saved, always saved”) doctrine. So how is a Christian saved? Is it by doing good deeds and refraining from doing bad things? Is salvation attained by Christian works? Or is it by faith alone? If by faith alone, then where do Christian works fit in? Let’s see what the Bible has to say on this matter.



“Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done.” ([Ephesians 2:9 NLT](#)) The same verse in the NIV says that salvation is “not by works.” So obviously, the Bible says our own works cannot save us. It is not saying that as Christians, we should not be doing good works. Rather, it is saying that salvation is not attained simply by doing good works.

Do Christian works produce salvation, or does salvation produce Christian works?

“To cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works.” ([Titus 2:14 CSB](#)) We Christians should be eager to do good works.

“That slave whose master finds him working when he comes will be rewarded.” ([Matthew 24:46 CSB](#)) Christians are expected by God and Christ to work as Christians. See [Matthew 25:14-46](#); [Matthew 24:45-51](#); [Luke 12:42-48](#); [Luke 19:11-27](#).

“To equip his people for works of service.” ([Ephesians 4:12 NIV](#)) So God’s people, Christians, are saved and continuously *equipped* for “works of service.” So rather than being the mechanism by which Christians are saved, good works are actually a product of salvation. A Christian who is truly saved will be equipped by God for good works and will therefore be fully

able to accomplish these works.

“You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.” ([Revelation 3:1 CSB](#)) A Christian who is not working for God and Christ is spiritually dead.

“For I have not found your works complete before my God.” ([Revelation 3:2 CSB](#)) While no amount of Christian works can save the Christian, works of Christian service are vital for a Christian so that Jesus “will never erase his name from the book of life.” ([Revelation 3:5 CSB](#))

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” ([Ephesians 2:10 NIV](#)) Saved Christians are “God’s handiwork.” God through Christ has done a special work being “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. ([Ephesians 4:24 NIV](#)) The point of being “saved” (vs. 8) starts the work of being “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” This is not “working one’s way to salvation,” but working for God and Christ because one is saved. Anyone who is not saved is “dead” spiritually in “transgressions and sins.” ([Ephesians 2:1 NIV](#)) But now, God has “made us alive with Christ” ([Ephesians 2:5 NIV](#)), to do good works.

[James 2:14-26](#) discusses the relationship of faith and works in some detail, even giving Biblical examples, such as Rahab and Abraham. The main point is “that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” ([James 2:24 CSB](#)) He says that “I will show you my faith from my works.” ([James 2:18 CSB](#)) Obviously, proper Christian works are vital, not optional. While no Christian can earn their salvation through good works, James’ conclusion is that “faith without works is dead.” ([James 2:26 CSB](#))

But let’s be clear: Just as “Abraham was” not “justified by works” ([Romans 4:2 CSB](#)), neither are we. Let no one mistake that.

Just as [Romans 4](#) uses Abraham as an example of how no one is justified or declared righteous by works, but by faith, [James 2](#) uses Abraham to prove that genuine faith is

accompanied by works.

“You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?” (James 2:20 NIV) Some who don’t like what James says here about works claim this contradicts what Paul says about faith alone in Romans. Martin Luther, for example, was one of them. He, and others today, have dismissed James as being uninspired. Like other parts of the Bible that may appear to be contradictory but are actually complementary, James and Romans complement each other. How so?

“You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” (James 2:22 NIV) Without actions, faith is incomplete. Biblical faith and works go together.

“And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” (James 2:23 NIV) Abraham believed God, “so much so that he was willing to sacrifice his one and only son.” (Hebrews 11:17 NIV) This is how Abraham’s faith and works worked together. One was not complete without the other.

The misunderstanding that many have based on scriptures such as Romans 4 is that they don’t look at the scriptures in context. When the scriptures are looked at isolated from their context, misunderstandings occur. What is the context of Romans 4?

Notice how many times in Romans 4 circumcision is mentioned. The Jews thought that outward actions proved their righteousness. They also were fanatical about keeping the Mosaic Law, and all their man-made rules pertaining to it. By doing all this, they thought their righteousness was guaranteed. This is similar to pagans thinking they could manipulate their gods through various actions. Notice how Romans 4:14 refers to “those who depend on the law” (NIV). Romans 4 therefore argues against dependence on “works of the law” (Galatians 2:16 NIV), like Galatians does.

Getting the context of Romans and Galatians helps us to see clearly there is no contradiction between these two Bible books and the book of James. Paul tells us that Christians are saved through faith and not works, and James tells us that Christians who are saved through their faith will produce good works as a result of their faith. These ideas are not contradictory – they are complimentary. Christian works are an outward sign of faith, but they are not the means of salvation. And this faith in Jesus Christ and the work he accomplished is the only means of salvation.