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Session 30 – James and Paul

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For almost 2,000 years, there's been this apparent contradiction in the New Testament that has seriously tripped people up. It's like a theological heavyweight match, you know? In one corner, you've got the Apostle Paul, and in the other, the Apostle James. And they're both tackling one of the biggest questions in Christianity.

How exactly is a person made right with God? Okay, so on one side, you have Paul. He seems to make it absolutely crystal clear, right? He says a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. But then you flip over to James, and it's like, whoa, hold on a second.

He says a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. I mean, it looks like they're in a total head-to-head disagreement. So what gives? Did somebody just miss a huge typo when they were putting the Bible together? Or is there maybe something a little deeper going on here that we're just not seeing at first glance? Well, that's the mystery we're going to try and solve today.

All right, to even begin to untangle this, we've got to ask ourselves, why does it look like a contradiction to us in the first place? And it turns out the answer has a ton to do with the way most of us, especially in the Western world, have been taught to read the Bible. Let's call it the Pauline lens problem. And what's so wild is how much history has shaped the way we read these texts.

You see, when Martin Luther kicked off the Protestant Reformation, Paul's incredible message about justification by faith became like the central pillar of the gospel for millions of people. And that's totally understandable. But it also kind of created this default filter, a lens, if you will, that everything else in the New Testament started to be read through.

And this, this has some pretty big consequences. Paul's letters basically become the canon within the canon. You know, they're the gold standard, the measuring stick for every other book.

So when a writer like James comes along and doesn't seem to fit the mold, what happens? Well, he either gets pushed aside—I mean, Martin Luther himself famously called the book of James an epistle of straw—or we kind of twist and bend his words until he sounds a lot more like Paul. But what if that's just the wrong way to go about it? To really get to the bottom of this, we have to do something kind of radical. We have to try and take off those Pauline glasses.

We need to let James be James and let Paul be Paul and actually listen to what each of them was trying to say to their own audience in their own time. Okay, so our first big clue is a game changer. It turns out, Paul and James weren't even in the same conversation.

They weren't arguing with each other. They were writing to totally different groups of people who were facing totally different problems. And, this is key, they were even using the same words to talk about different things.

This chart really lays it all out. Just look at Paul's situation. He was up against legalism, this idea that non-Jewish converts had to follow the whole Mosaic law to be saved.

So when he talks about works, he's thinking about things like circumcision and dietary laws. Now, pan over to James. His audience had a completely different problem.

They were apathetic and ignoring the poor in their community. So for him, works meant acts of love, of charity. And check out how they use the word faith.

For Paul, it's this deep, wholehearted trust in God. But James, he's targeting a so-called faith that's just, well, intellectual agreement, just knowing the facts. And James really drives this home with an absolute mic drop of a line.

He says, oh, so you believe that God is one? Good for you. Well, even the demons believe that, and they shudder. Wow.

His point is just devastatingly simple. A faith that doesn't actually change how you live isn't saving faith. It's just a correct opinion.

It's a dead piece of trivia. All right. Our second clue is fascinating because both Paul and James pull out the exact same example to prove their points: Abraham, the father of faith himself.

But here's the twist. They're looking at two totally different moments in his life story. So Paul hones in on Genesis chapter 15.

This is early on. It's the moment Abraham first believes God's promise. And Paul says, see, right there.

Abraham believed God, and that belief was credited to him as righteousness. But then James comes along, and he, like, fast-forwards the tape. He goes all the way to Genesis 22, many years later, when Abraham's faith is put through the ultimate trial, when he's asked to offer up his own son Isaac.

And James says, that's the moment. That's when Abraham was justified by what he did. And this is the key that unlocks the whole thing.

For James, Abraham's action, offering Isaac, didn't replace his faith. It didn't earn him salvation. No.

It was the proof. It was the validation. It was the thing that completed the faith he already had for years.

The work didn't cancel out the faith. It showed that the faith was real all along. So once you put all these pieces together, the contradiction just melts away.

You realize Paul and James aren't at odds at all. They're not fighting. They're actually giving us two sides of the same coin.

It's like they're giving us a complete 3D picture of what real, living, saving faith actually looks like. You know, there's a great little line that I think sums up James' whole point perfectly. The only true faith is a faithful faith.

It's so simple, right? A faith that is genuine can't help but produce action. It's not about faith plus works, as if they're two separate things. It's about a faith that works.

And in the end, it makes perfect sense why the Bible includes both Paul and James. It's because we, as human beings, need to hear both of their messages. They're like two guardrails on a highway, keeping us from veering off into two very different but equally dangerous ditches.

So how do we apply this? It's pretty straightforward. We need to listen to Paul when we're tempted by pride, when we start thinking we can somehow earn our way to God through our own efforts or own goodness. Paul pulls us back and reminds us, no, salvation is a gift.

You receive it by faith. But we need to listen to James when we're tempted by apathy, when we start to think that just agreeing with a set of beliefs is enough. James is the one who grabs us by the shoulders and says, "A faith that doesn't do anything is a dead faith.

And all of this leaves us with one last big question to think about. In our world today, a world that is just overflowing with both self-righteous pride on one hand and a kind of passive, intellectual belief on the other, which of these two ancient voices do you think we need to hear the loudest? And maybe, just maybe, the answer to that question tells us something really important about ourselves.