

FAITH & WORKS

Reconciling an Apparent Contradiction

1. **REMEMBERING** Life is filled with apparent contradictions, paradoxes, mysteries. Name 4-5 inside or outside the Christian faith that interest you.

2. **REFLECTING** Read aloud the quote below and discuss insights gained.

It is exactly this balance of apparent contradictions that has been the whole buoyancy of the healthy man.... Take the case of courage. No quality has ever so much addled the brains and tangled the definitions of merely rational sages. Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die. "He that will lose his life, the same shall save it," is not a piece of mysticism for saints and heroes. It is a piece of everyday advice for sailors or mountaineers. It might be printed in an Alpine guide or a drill book. This paradox is the whole principle of courage; even of quite earthly or quite brutal courage. A man cut off by the sea may save his life if he will risk it on the precipice. He can only get away from death by continually stepping within an inch of it. A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine. (G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*)

3. **DISCOVERING** Read aloud the two passages and discuss the verses from each that reveal the five differences from the list that follows.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ²If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ⁴Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. (Romans 4:1-5)

What 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, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is

it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, 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 what I do.

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 ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 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. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by what he does 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. (James 2:14-26)

Romans 4:1-5

James 2:14-26

GENRE

Epistolary literature; focuses on doctrine, theology

Wisdom literature; focuses on how to live before God

TOPIC

Is *theological*: justification by faith before God

Is *practical*: justification of faith before men

QUESTION

Q: How can we be right with God?

Q: How do you test for a living faith?

A: By faith

A: By works

SUBJECT

People: how people are justified

Faith: how faith is justified

DEFINITION

Justify = make right before God

Justify = prove before men

4. **CONNECTING** What challenges and/or comforts have resulted from new understandings you have been given by this discussion?

5. **RESPONDING** What will you do in the coming week to respond to a challenge or comfort you named?

Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious.

(G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*)