



FAITH THAT WORKS

JAMES VS. PAUL?

- Romans 4, written by Paul, refutes the idea that we can be justified in the eyes of the God by our meritorious works. Rather, we are justified by faith, just as Abraham had righteousness reckoned to him as a result of his faith, well before circumcision or the Law of Moses.
- James 2:14ff, on the other hand, indicates that faith without works is dead and useless. It cannot save (v. 14). Abraham's faith was perfected by his works as the two functioned in harmony.
- So, is there a conflict here?



In the Sixteenth Century, the Catholic church was rocked by the declarations of reformers like Martin Luther that man is justified by faith alone, apart from any action on his part.

The Council of Trent (mid-Sixteenth Century) was the Catholic response to the Reformation and laid out their objection to Luther's theological positions. For both sides, it seemed like the debate was between what Paul said and what James said!

OVERSIMPLIFICATIONS

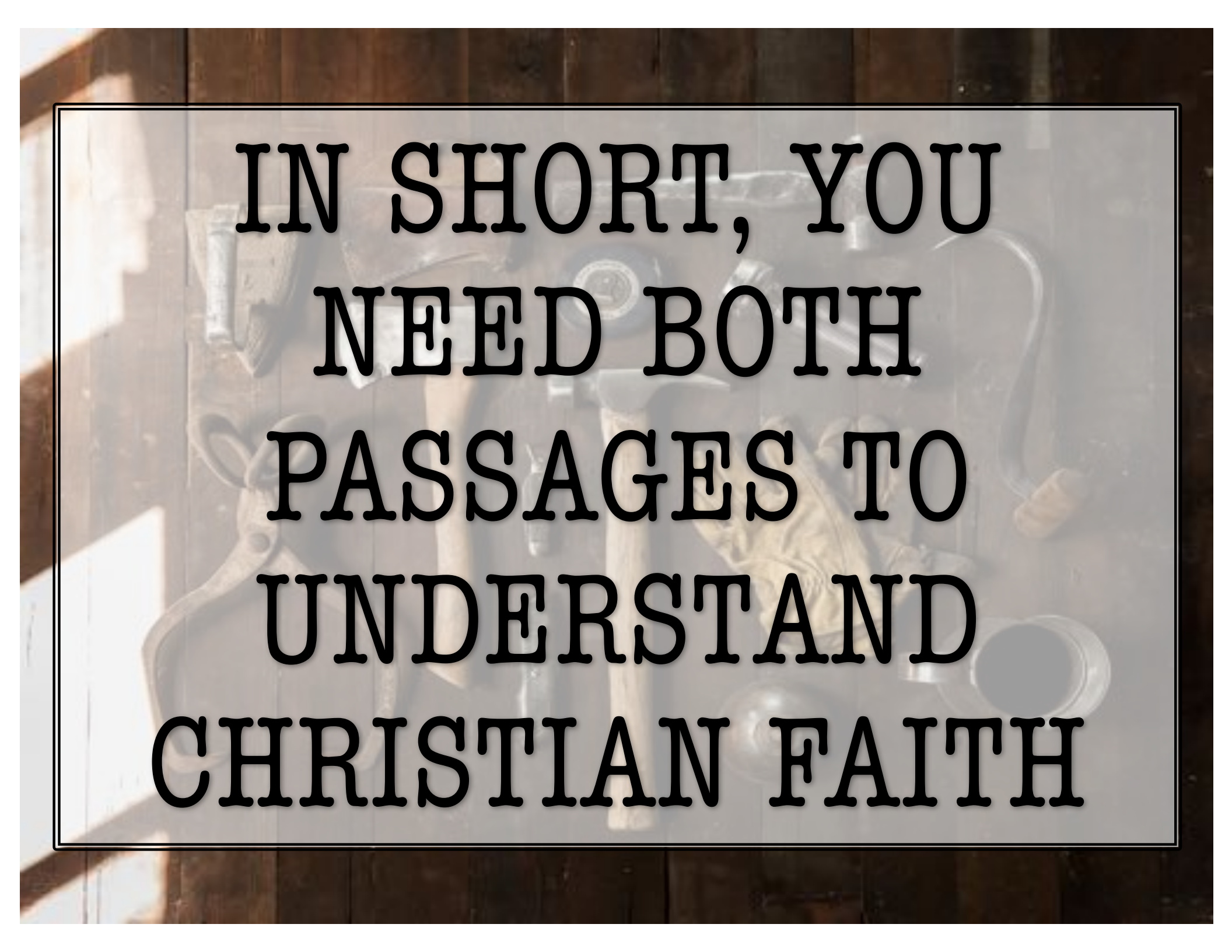
- First, Paul supports the idea that our works VERY MUCH have something to do with our salvation. They are not totally divorced from each other, as the Calvinist would argue (2 Cor. 5:10, Rom. 2:6-7, Gal. 6:8-9).
- Faith is, by definition, a work – that is, faith is not a feeling or merely an idea, but an active, functional component of our lives (2 Thess. 1:11, 1 Thess. 1:3, Gal. 5:6, Rom. 1:5, John 6:29, 3:36).
- When Paul writes about “works”, this must be understood in its context. “Faith vs. works” is meant to convey the conflict between faith in Jesus Christ for justification and obedience to the Law of Moses.

ABRAHAM BELIEVED

- It's interesting that both Paul and James use Abraham as their case-in-point and quote from the same OT passage (Gen. 15:6). So is Abraham just an unwilling pawn in the struggle over faith and works?
- Romans 4 presents Abraham as somebody who believed in the promises of God, specifically, that he would have a child (vv. 18-22). In the context, however, Paul is not contrasting this belief with *obedience* but dependence on works of the Law of Moses. That is why he emphasizes circumcision (or lack of it) beginning in verse 9. Abraham was not considered righteous because he was obedient to the Law (which didn't even exist), but because he trusted God and ordered his life accordingly (Hebrews 11:8-12).

BELIEF IN ACTION

- So it was faith that justified Abraham before God. He couldn't be justified by circumcision (because it had not been commanded yet) or by Law (because it wasn't given), so it had to be based on his faith – the very thing that justifies the Gentiles (Gal. 2:16, Ac. 15:9ff).
- Rather than seeing Romans and James as parallel passages that seem to be in conflict, we should see them as sequential. That is, Romans establishes that it was faith in the promises of God that justified Abraham. James, building upon that truth, explains what *kind* of faith Abraham had. It was a *working* faith that was perfected by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. In other words, Abraham believed that God would give him a son, but showed his belief when he gave Isaac back.



IN SHORT, YOU
NEED BOTH
PASSAGES TO
UNDERSTAND
CHRISTIAN FAITH

FAITH THAT WORKS

- Perhaps James wrote what he did, not because he was refuting Paul, but because he was refuting those who failed to understand Paul or keep his faith/works discourse in its context. It is as if James wrote this in prophetic anticipation of the Reformation!
- True faith IS a work (v. 22). The demons believe, but fail to order their lives in a way that is pleasing to God. Questioning the demons' faith is only a vain attempt to deflect what James is saying: we are not saved by faith alone, contrary to what any Reformed theologian says.
- Our faith must be a living, active faith that can be seen in how we live – which does not mean we *save* ourselves. Having a working faith is not the same thing as the sacrifice of Jesus!