

I love the children's movie *Hoodwinked*. It is a remake on the classic tale of Little Red Riding Hood. While we know the story of Little Red Riding Hood as the tale of the girl who goes to visit granny only to discover that a wolf has disguised himself as granny, this tale shows how there are things that seem contradictory when each individual is interviewed. Grizzly and Stork are critter cops who are investigating a disturbance of the peace at between Granny, her granddaughter Little Red Riding Hood, a Big Bad Wolf, and a Woodsman. As the duo interviews the parties involved they suspect Granny is not as helpless as she lets on, Red has hidden motives, Wolf is not much of a predator and the Woodsman might be as dense as the tress he cuts down.

As you watch the movie, it looks like there are contradictory messages going on. And sometimes we can come to Scripture and think that there are apparent contradictions. Recently a major Christian publisher released a book entitled *Jesus Contradicted*. And by all accounts, the book seems to present the fact that there are legitimate contradictions in the gospels. From the verses that we read this morning (Jas. 2:24; Rom. 3:28) there sounds like an immediate contradiction. James says we are not saved by faith alone but by works and Paul says that no one will be saved by works of the law. These verses have led to all sorts of controversy in the history of Christianity. This has led to a major division between Protestants and Catholics. Are we saved by faith alone as Protestants claim? Or are we saved by faith and works, as Roman Catholics believe? At the outset, it looks like we cannot be saved by faith alone, one of the very things that the Reformers protested about from the Roman Catholic church, because James clearly says that we are not saved by faith alone.

How do we handle apparent contradictions?

First, when we come to the Bible, we **humbly remember the One Author guided the many authors.**

The Bible is a complex book, made up of poetry, narrative, laws, and proverbs. Over forty authors wrote their messages over a period of about 2 millennia. They were shepherds, fisherman, physicians, and teachers. While they came from diverse backgrounds, they all had a similar understanding – that God was One, that the way to be rescued from the problem of evil in the heart is to have a new heart, and that someone had to deliver them. This expectation led them to look for the coming son of Eve who would crush the serpent's head and rule as God's appointed forever King. So they were unified in their message.

As Christians, we believe that God breathed out his words to holy men who had been taught by the Holy Spirit. They studied the words before them. They were consistent with the revelation of who God was and what God had come to do. And they were inspired to write the Scriptures – not as we understand being inspired as having a great idea, but inspired in the sense that the Holy Spirit used their unique personalities, styles, language, and situations to bring about a

unified message from beginning to end of how God would rescue the world and how God would deliver human hearts from the evil that is so deep within.

We believe that the Scriptures are divinely inspired, meaning that they are given by God to holy men who taught us God's holy Word. They are without error or fault and are sufficient for us to live a godly life. Therefore, when we come to an apparent contradiction, we first confess that we need to understand God better and must work hard to learn the consistent message of Scripture.

Second, we acknowledge the tension and **begin by understanding each biblical writer on their own terms.**

There are several similarities that cause us confusion. Both Paul and James are talking about faith and works and how we are justified. So at the very outset, there looks like a contradiction. Are we saved by grace through faith, and not by works (Eph. 2:8) or are we not saved by faith by faith alone (Jas. 2:24)? So we feel the tension. But what next?

There have been three ways that people have tried to address this issue. First, there are those who have said that James is correcting Paul. This has been the issue that Luther took when studying James because he revered Paul so greatly. Second, others have said that James is correcting the teachings of Paul's followers. We all know how people can characterize our views and misrepresent them or misunderstand them. James even says that this happened to his view of the law. When he met with Paul and the other apostles in Acts 21:17-26, James wanted Paul to know that many misunderstood his view of the law. It's hard when we are understood, especially as a teacher because we know how a misunderstanding or distortion or over-emphasis in teaching can lead to some very detrimental practices.

The third way has been to understand each writer on their own terms. I have been greatly helped by a Catholic writer on this issue. Luke Timothy Johnson has written a lot about the book of James and he laments how people have read James in light of Paul. Johnson has said that people read what is different from Paul and James rather than understanding them on their own terms.

James is developing his teaching from the OT and the teachings of Jesus. He is talking to believers who are reacting to persecution and loss of influence. He wants them to be obedient in their action (Jas. 1:25; see also Matt. 6:1-18 on the teachings of Jesus). Loving God and others is essential (compare to Jesus in Matt. 25:34-46) and emphasizes that you can't just use words but show faith in action (see Jesus in Matt. 7:24-27). True followers hear and repent and obey.

But James doesn't address any of the issues that Paul addresses: circumcision, Sabbath keeping, dietary laws. And when Paul is talking about not being saved by works of the law, he is talking to Jews and Gentiles, working to bring them into harmony with one another and understand that their commonality is in Christ and not in the OT Jewish laws and practices that Jews used to

separate from the world around them to show that they were a distinct people. For Paul, what makes us distinct is our commonality in the crucified Christ, not Jewish laws.

Both James and Paul understand that genuine faith believes true doctrine and is expressed in faith and obedience. Paul says that there is an obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5) and this is consistent with James's teaching that faith without works is dead. One scholar on James has said it this way: "Paul is justifying the reception of Gentiles into the church without circumcision whereas James is discussing the problem of the failure of works of charity within the church (which may be totally Jewish). If James intends to contradict Paul, he has so misunderstood him that his use of biblical citations and the meanings of similar expressions are totally different. This would hardly indicate he had read Romans. (Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGNT, p. 131).

Since I grew up in a home with a mathematician, it helps me to put it into an equation:

What we hear:

James: Faith + Works = Salvation

Paul: Faith = Salvation – Works

But both of these equations are fundamentally wrong. What James and Paul are saying, when we hear them on their own terms is this:

Faith = Salvation + Works

In other words, the Protestant Reformer John Calvin would say it this way: "Faith alone justifies, but faith that justifies is never alone" (*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, Baker, 1979, p. 309-317).

So when we hear James on his own and Paul on his own, we come to see that they are written at different times written to different circumstances. "James would be warning believers not to court the wealthy or give credibility to the faith of the rich who are in their community. James would be giving a caution: the rich (and others) who offer empty words to oppressed Christians without also meeting tangible needs are displaying a lack of love, and therefore a lack of faith. True faith produces good works – which James especially characterizes as deeds of mercy. This makes sense of Abraham and Rahab, who are depicted as generous people." – (C. Morgan, *A Theology of James*, pp. 136-7). Whereas Paul is writing to Jews who are struggling with the inclusion of Gentiles into the church and wants people to be clear that you do not have to do the 'works of the law' to become a Christian; rather, God has prepared good works in advance for you to do because you are saved. When James is talking about justification, he is talking about that final justification that declaration of heaven that says, "Well done, good and faithful servant," whereas Paul is talking about that initial justification that says you are now in right standing with God not because of what you have done.

When we hear James and Paul on their own terms, then we understand how James is not reacting to Paul, but writing to persecuted Jewish Christians and Paul is writing to a divided church about Jewish works of the law. James's concern isn't the same as Paul's, but their doctrine is the same. They can take something the same like Abraham (Jas. 2; Rom. 4) and apply it differently. Paul can see that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, then his faith worked out obedience; James can look at Abraham and see his faith as a display of true generosity and trust in God.

When we come to Scripture, we need to recognize that we come with our own biases. And when we acknowledge our biases and humbly admit that we need help to read Scripture, the Spirit of God will lead us into all truth as we work hard and trust that God's word is true.

And when Grizzly and Stork investigated the incident with Red, Granny, the Wolf, and the Woodsman, they discover that there isn't a contradiction in their stories, just a different perspective and emphasis that comes from their situations. So as we come to Scripture, it is not *Jesus Contradicted*, nor are James and Paul at odds, but instead it is us who need to be corrected. As we humble ourselves, we might be challenged to apply God's word rightly to our unique circumstances so that we might trust and obey.