

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JAMES
WITH AN EMPHASIS ON JAMES 2:14-26

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief introduction to the book of James with an emphasis on chapter 2 verses 14-26. This will include an outline, purpose, audience, key passages followed by an explanation of James 2:14-26. The reason for this approach is to apply context towards this often misunderstood and misapplied passage in question. This is critical to unlocking the nature of James' argument and its application to the audience and to believers today.

Purpose of the Epistle

Dr. Charles Swindoll once said “there are really two messages in the Bible; the way to God and the way with God.”¹ This couldn't be truer as the latter is the focus of most of the New Testament including the book of James. James is addressing believers who were being persecuted and who had been ‘scattered’ (see Js. 1:1) and were facing challenges in their Christian walk. He encouraged them to persevere in trials (5:7-10) and to seek peace amongst brethren (5:9). James is filled with instructions for Christian living as opposed to becoming a Christian. This can be quickly attested to as a simple study reveals that of the 100 verses of instruction, 54 of them are commands for believers to follow.²

Without this key understanding the book can become very difficult to reconcile with Pauline theology, as James uses various words and phrases similar to that of Paul, but with a very different context and thus different meaning. Martin Luther said of this book that it was “the epistle of straw.”³ The reason for this was he was attempting to reconcile passages like James 2:24 which says that “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only”; whereas Paul in Romans said that “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who

¹ Time, date, and venue unknown.

² Based on a word/verse study. I could have missed a few.

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Book 7, (Peabody, MA: 1985), 253.

justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.” – Romans 3:28. The question that arises is whether or not James is teaching that eternal life and justification before God comes by faith *plus* works. Or did Paul simply forget to address works in his writings and its role in eternal life salvation?

Authorship, Audience, & Date

The epistle of James was most likely written by the half-brother of Jesus, not to be confused with James, the brother of the Apostle John. This is the most common view and was held by the early church and is largely derived from the process of elimination of the others James mentioned in the New Testament. The internal evidence includes similarities in the Greek to the speech given in Acts 15⁴, and the numerous references to Judaism and other internal evidence about the life of the author and what the readers would have been familiar with in Palestine (e.g. not far from sea (1:6), land has figs, oil, and wine (3:12) etc.)⁵. The likely conclusion then is that this is James, the half-brother of Christ.

It was also likely written prior to 62 A.D.. The Jewish historian Josephus indicated that James was stoned to death by an angry mob.⁶ Dr. Constable and Dr. Bing favor a date in the mid 40's as “it was probably written before the Jerusalem Council in AD 49 because there is no hint of controversy over Gentiles and circumcision.”⁷ Hodges favors an even earlier date of mid 30's noting that this was to dispersed Jews “probably at a time *before* Paul's initial mission to the Gentile world.”⁸ In either case, it can be argued this was likely one of the first epistles written, if not the first.

⁴ See Hodges 9 for further discussion and comparison of passages.

⁵ See Hodges, 9 for further discussion.

⁶ Gary Burge, Lynn Cohick, *The New Testament in Antiquity*. (Grand Rapids: 2009), 382.

⁷ Dr. Charlie Bing, “The New Testament Introductions and Analytical Outlines” (Burlison: 2013) <http://gracelife.org/resources/bibletools/> (last accessed April 13, 2014).

⁸ Zane Hodges, *The Epistle of James Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving:2004), 12.

As stated earlier, James' audience was believers. This is proven by a simple word study that shows that James addresses his readers as 'my brothers and sisters' no less than fourteen times!⁹ In addition, in verse 1:1 he addresses the letter to "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad". This phrase *twelve tribes* indicates he is referring to Jews; and the dispersion, (en te diaspora), translated here as 'scattered abroad' could mean one of two things; these could be Jews "who had scattered from Palestine"¹⁰ or as Hodges notes "the scattering of the Jewish Christians (at the first persecution, Acts 8:1)".¹¹ The second meaning could be simply a title or eschatological metaphor. "James here may be creating with the term "dispersion" "a symbolic world: they had become."¹² In either case, scholars tend to agree Jews were in view and they were certainly believers.

Outline

It has been said that the structure of James has puzzled scholars,¹³ some have described it as 'a string of pearls' in literary form.¹⁴ In other words, random ideas all strung together. While it is true that sections use different vocabulary and metaphors, all sections point to a consistent key theme; *despite circumstances, a believer's attitude and actions should reflect God's love*. The latter point is critical due to the fact that if there wasn't a structure, there would not necessarily be a key theme throughout. Hodges, Bing, and other theologians maintain there is a discernable framework. A simplified outline¹⁵ is as follows:

⁹ See James 1:2,16,19; 2:1,5,14; 3:10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19.

¹⁰ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on James* (Dallas, Texas: Sonic Light, 2004), 1.

¹¹ Hodges, 11.

¹² Burge, 376.

¹³ Burge, 379.

¹⁴ Hodges, 14.

¹⁵ For a detailed outline see Hodges, 16 and Bing online at <http://www.gracelife.org/resources/bibletools/>

- I. Introduction: 1:1-20 – Theme: Behavior in trials
- II. Response of action towards God: 1:21-2:26 – Theme: Obedience to the Word both in thought and action.
- III. Response of words towards God: 3:1-18 – Theme: Obedience to the Word via the tongue.
- IV. Response to Worldliness: 4:1-5:6 – Theme: Humility towards God and others
- V. Conclusions: 5:7-20 – Theme: Perseverance, patience, and prayer in trials.

Key Theme

As noted earlier the key theme throughout James is that ‘despite circumstances, a believer’s attitude and actions should reflect God’s love.’ The believer *should* understand that because they have been saved by grace through faith, they *should* now live a life by faith in the law of liberty (see also Gal. 5:1, and law of love or Christ, Gal. 5:14). Faith, or *pisteuo*, in this sense, simply means believing God, or taking Him at His word. James is encouraging his readers that their actions should be a reflection of what they believe; that believers need to speak and act as though they belong to Christ. James says in the introduction verses 1:22,25 “be doers of the word, and not hearers only ...he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” What James says here regarding the law of liberty is consistent with Paul in Galatians 5:1 “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” What Paul and James are saying is that the believer has freedom and liberty from sin and is now able to express who they truly are in Christ.

What quickly becomes clear is that James is not discussing eternal life salvation; he is not asking believers to look back at their works to prove they are saved as some many assert.¹⁶ The believer is being *encouraged* to live for God and show the world how God views them and who they are. In other words, believers cannot use their works to prove that they are a believer (non-believers do good words too and Christians are not without sin (1 John 1:8)), but the works and the use of their tongues can give insight to the world as to who they are. If the believer spends time trying to prove they are saved through their works (a fruitless effort), it necessarily takes the focus off of Christ. It also leads to lack of assurance of salvation and contradicts simple passages like 1 John 5:13 that say we can know we are eternally saved.

With this important axiom in mind, the book of James becomes one of the easiest to apply. James gives explicit directions and principles throughout the book. For example, verses 1:2-3 says “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” We are to welcome trials as they mold us and conform us into God’s image. James is encouraging his readers to find the positive side of hardship in this life. James sets the tone as to the attitude required, one of joy (not necessarily happiness). This is the opposite of the worldly reaction to trouble. As Hodges notes, “James is exhorting these believers to view their hard times with the eye of faith.”¹⁷

Another passage that is an imperative is verses 1:22 mentioned earlier, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Burdick notes that “The call to ‘do what it says’ lies at the center of all that James teaches. It sums up the message of the whole book”¹⁸ As with many believers from this time to now, it’s easy to listen and do nothing. James

¹⁶ E.g. Piper, MacArthur, Sproul

¹⁷ Hodges, 19.

¹⁸ J. Paul Tanner and Robert N. Wilkin ed., *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, Volume 2. (Denton:2010), 175.

is imploring them to live out what they hear. It's interesting to note that James had to make this explicit, as it was the mindset of Jews to equate hearing with obeying. The Shema, is sometimes translated as 'hear', although it rarely simply meant to perceive sound. It often encompassed the whole idea of listening and responding with action. In Exodus 24:7 the Israelites, in response to the reading of the Word, said "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient." The word obedient is the word shema. The Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear (shema), O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD is one" In saying the Shema, it was understood that the person was saying "Listen and obey!" It was a commitment to God and His commandments. Point being, the words hear and obey are synonymous in Hebrew and this idea would not have been new to the readers but apparently they needed to be reminded.

These types of instructions continue throughout the rest of the book of James with themes that follow the basic outline given in James 1:19 that says "let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath." Hodges noted that "James is the voice of a great Christian leader whose grasp of the spiritual life and of human nature is equal to any in the NT."¹⁹

James 2:14-26

With a solid understanding of the overview of the book and key verses, James 2:14-26 more easily comes into focus. One of the important foundations to scriptural interpretation is to use the simple passages to interpret the difficult ones. If the exegete realizes that one truth is expressed clearly and routinely, then through process of elimination they can determine what the author is not saying, since the Bible cannot contradict itself. For example, it's clear in John 3:16 that God loved *all* of mankind and that He sent his son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty of sin for *everyone*, and in order to gain all the promises that come with that, including eternal life, all they

¹⁹Wilkin, 1099.

simply need to do is believe in Christ for it; to take God at his word; no more, no less. This passage should not be reinterpreted from the simple plain reading; its truths can be understood by children and thus applied throughout scripture, including James 2.

As briefly mentioned earlier, many have attempted to distort James 2. Some claim that justification used in James is soteriological and that the works spoken of are to be used as evidence of ‘true saving faith.’²⁰ As opposed to “simply an assent to doctrines (2:14-20).”²¹ Faith in their view must be *active* otherwise that individual may not have been saved to begin with.²² It’s interesting to note that faith in the proper object [Jesus Christ] without strings attached has been under attack since the New Testament was written. Paul fought this heresy in Galatians. Likewise Martin Luther was ridiculed by many including Trent who was “alarmed that anyone should believe that they could be justified [declared righteous by God] by faith, without any need for obedience or spiritual renewal.”²³

James begins his pericope from verse 14-26 on the topic of living out one’s faith. This is not unlike the rest of the book as seen earlier. The exception here is that James uses very forceful words and terminology similar to those of Paul and John; for example, “if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith **save** him?” (Js. 2:14), and “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is **dead**.” (2:17). Likewise “even the demons believe and tremble...O foolish man, faith without **works** is dead?” (2:20), and “You see then that a man is **justified by works, and not by faith only**.” (2:24). This is the common misinterpretation which leads to theological cul-de-sacs, and the potential of a stunted Christian life. If it was faith plus something

²⁰ There are no ‘kinds’ of faith in scripture. Faith is faith, which is the noun form of the verb to believe. Which simply means to accept something as true; this can only be done with the mind not an appendage.

²¹ Wilkin, 376.

²² A common interpretation by Calvinists such as Piper and MacArthur.

²³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology, An Introduction* (Malden, MA: 2007), 379.

John, Paul, and Jesus could have easily expressed this, but they didn't; in fact they refuted it! So if James is not saying that eternal life salvation includes works, what is he saying?

Recall the theme of the book; James doesn't suddenly shift gears in this passage from telling his brothers and sisters in Christ they need to look to their works to be saved. He already knows that they are saved otherwise he wouldn't have called them brother and sister. He's continuing to encourage them and show them the futility of not living out what God has done within them and he uses three strong character examples and metaphors to illustrate this point. Because, how can people who are *not* saved know the love of God without seeing it being expressed outwardly by His disciples?²⁴

It should first be understood though that faith is simply being convinced of something as true; as Hebrews 11:1 states "faith is being sure of what is hoped for and certain of what is not seen." Faith in the Greek is the noun form of the verb, believe. To have 'saving faith' simply means that a person has placed their faith in the proper object to save them eternally. Faith in and of itself cannot save and the result of that is faith in faith which becomes works. But the question remains, why would James say "if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" (2:14). The answer to the rhetorical question James expects is no. But the question must be asked, what does the word *save* mean or refer to? Saved from hell? Saved from enemies? Many Christians automatically assume that the word 'save' means salvation from hell.²⁵ James is not discussing eternal damnation; James is talking to believers and discussing discipleship and failure of proper actions. The 'save' here is to save them from God's temporal judgment (Heb) and save them from succumbing to the wages of sin (Gal. 6:9). Based on the immediate context and the context of the book, this could *not* mean eternal life salvation as it

²⁴ Unbelievers cannot read minds like God can.

²⁵ 75% of the time in the Old Testament when save is used it means deliverance from an enemy.

would immediately contradict the simple passages and stretch credulity of the context at hand. James' use of the word save is temporal in nature.

James also uses the metaphor 'dead' to say that "faith without works is dead" (2:17). Note this does not say "faith without works is non-existent." The word dead simply means ineffectual or not operating; similar to having a dead battery in a car. The battery (faith) is there, it's just not working (dead). James goes on to explain that expressing one's faith to the world needs to be done through action. He states "show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (2:18). This is an opposing contrast meant to motivate the believer to action.

James follows this using his first character example, demons, when he says "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" (2:19). This passage has been used to assert that "head faith" isn't enough to save because "even the demons believe." If this is the case one needs to illustrate the absurd with absurdity and ask: "if the demons had the right kind of faith can they be saved?" What James is doing is using an illustration from the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4 "hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" The demons also believe God is one just like the Jews do, they are monotheistic. But Jesus didn't die for the demons, he's their judge,²⁶ which is what the fear and trembling is likely referencing. James is using a strong character example and saying 'my brothers and sisters, believing in monotheism is commendable, but it can be held by both men and demons to no profit if it is without appropriate good works.' James is making the case that faith without action is useless, using the demons as an extreme example.

James' next character example is Abraham. This differs from Paul however in that Paul discusses Abraham's conversion. Paul's focus is justification before God. James on the

²⁶ Matthew 8:29

other hand discusses Abraham offering Isaac on the altar (vv. 21-24). James' focus was on justification before man. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?"

Justification means "to declare right", it does not mean "to become right." It was a judicial term used in this era and in scripture it is used in two ways. The first is a declaration by God that we're declared right. Kenneth Allen notes:

What does it mean to be justified? It means to be declared righteous; to be accounted righteous. It is not a work done within the sinner, but a work done on behalf of the sinner. It is a legal term (or more precisely, in relation to salvation, a legal fact) by which the believing sinner is declared righteous before God while still being himself unrighteous.²⁷

The second is a declaration before man via works. Man can only see the external; he cannot read another person's heart. Paul in Romans 4:2 said that "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." Keep in mind, this was written after James penned his epistle. The implication is that justification by works does exist, but not simply in a soteriological nature and neither are the two ever coupled in scripture. There are two kinds of justification that are expressed in scripture. The kind James is driving home is easily discerned by the two character examples being discussed.

Recall the story of Abraham offering up his son Isaac. In Genesis 22 God instructed Abraham to head to the mountains in the land of Moriah. 22:3 says "So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son;" Abraham had two witnesses²⁸ with him as he headed up the mountain to carry out God's instructions. Abraham would have thus been justified before men through his actions.

²⁷ Kenneth Allen, "Justification by Faith," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (April-June 1978): 112.

²⁸ It's interesting to note that Deuteronomy 17:6 declares that two witnesses are critical in judgment.

James proceeds further and uses Rahab as an example of faith in action. “Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?” (James 2:25). She was a prostitute, someone unlikely to be trusted with mere words. Joshua chapter 2 discusses this incident where two spies were sent into Jericho to gather intelligence on the city and its fortifications. The king of Jericho accused Rahab of meeting with the spies which she didn’t deny, but she lied to redirect the king’s men and buy the spy’s time to escape. After this heroic act, Rahab went into a discussion about her faith in God. She then says the following in verse 12 “Now therefore, I beg you, swear to me by the Lord, **since I have shown you kindness**, that you also will show kindness to my father’s house...” [Emphasis mine]. Rahab showed the spies through action what was in her heart. Hodges agrees stating: “Rahab is selected as a striking example of a person whose physical life was “saved” precisely because she had works. ... Rahab, like Abraham before her, was justified by works in front of other people – i.e. before the nation of Israel.”²⁹

James concludes in verse 26 reiterating his point “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” In other words, without a spirit, the body, while it exists, cannot function properly. Likewise faith that isn’t accompanied by works results in a useless, ineffectual tool; like a dead battery.

Conclusions and Application

The conclusion then is that James is not discussing eternal life nor eternal damnation, but he’s exhorting believers to not sit idly by as believers. To do so is a danger every Christian faces, the results of which are apathy towards God and apathy towards others. Hodges rightly points out the antidote “Faith remains vital and alive as long as it is being translated into real

²⁹ Hodges, 71

works of living obedience.”³⁰ James then is a powerful letter for practical Christian living. James exhorts his readers to live out their faith, so that others can see that they’re bond-servants of Christ. James does not say that they should live out their faith so that they can prove to themselves if they’re a Christian.

The application for believers is this; Can others easily determine that you’re a Christian? People judge Christians by their actions. Are you a servant and do you have the servant attributes Romans 12:1-2?

“Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” – James 5:7-8

³⁰ Hodges, 72.

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