

## Thinking Through James Chapter 2

By Butch Simmons

The New Testament uses the words “faith” or “believe” (same Greek word) approximately 150 times to express the proper human response to the Gospel in order to receive eternal life. In speaking to others about this issue (Faith versus works) one of the passages that always comes into the discussion is James 2, particularly verse 17 (faith that is dead), verse 19 (faith that demons have), and verse 24 (justification by works). Are Paul in Romans 4 and James in James 2 at odds in what they have written? Certainly the Holy Spirit cannot be contradicting Himself. Is there a solution that allows both authors to be understood at face value without contradiction? In other words, is there a legitimate GRACE answer to what seems to be a contradiction? What James is NOT saying:

*He is not saying that there is more than one kind of faith involved in the salvation process. If this were his meaning, then we had better take heed and examine our works to see if they reveal that we had the right kind of faith when we were saved.*

Please notice that the emphasis in this perspective is on a person’s faith – what kind, how much, etc. As a contrast, when the word “faith” is used in the N.T. in connection with eternal salvation, the emphasis is never on the faith itself; rather it is on the *object* of one’s faith. The emphasis is on believing the correct thing. For example, Jesus asks Martha in John 11:26, “Do you believe this?” Believing the correct thing – the simple Gospel message (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4) – brings eternal life.

### So what IS James saying?

*The expression of a believer’s faith through good works brings **blessing** to the believer and **benefit** to those who are in need.*

1. Following a description of pure and undefiled religion (to visit orphans and widows, and to keep oneself unstained by the world) James says in verse one of chapter two “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with [an attitude of] personal favoritism.” The remainder of the chapter simply gives explanation and examples for the outworking of verse one. Verse one clearly indicates that James’ intended readers are Christians (“my brethren”; “your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”). Chapter two does not call into question their salvation (heaven), but since they are saved, they are to fulfill the royal law. This law, first found in Lev. 19:18 and repeated in Mt. 22:39; Mk. 12:31, 33; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; and here in James 2:8 is that “You shall love you neighbor as yourself.” Our Lord declared this to be the second greatest commandment.

Beginning in verse two, James gives an illustration of partiality, something not in agreement with the faith. Making distinctions is inconsistent with the faith. Verse nine says that when a person shows partiality, he or she is sinning. The illustration speaks of improper treatment of the poor. When this is done, James says the believer is guilty of two things with regard to God: Number One, attacking the purpose or plan of God (v. 5, “did not God choose the poor of this world”) and Two, attacking the Person of God (v. 7, “do they not blaspheme the fair name”).

Verse eight (the second greatest commandment) is the key to understanding chapter two. In verse nine James introduces an argument that partiality (making distinctions) is inconsistent with the Law as a whole and the Law regarding specifics. To stumble in one point of the Law makes one guilty of all, but notice the specific laws he uses to drive the point home. “Do not commit Adultery.” “Do not commit Murder.” Both are sins with

regard to the Royal Law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” James says that partiality even comes into play when people pick and choose which points of the Law they will follow. This is inconsistent with the faith of our Lord Jesus.

James is clear that the believer is not to show partiality. If you do, it is called transgression. Transgression brings discipline. The believer is to be consistent, speaking AND acting as those who will be judged by the Law of Liberty. James 1:25 reads “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.” God is by character absolutely Righteous and absolutely Just. What His Righteousness rejects His Justice must of necessity condemn or JUDGE. Some cry out, “Give me Justice.” Those who understand the character of God cry out, “Give me Mercy.” If mankind received what it deserved, Heaven would be without human occupants. Speaking of the believer, the Judgment Seat of Christ will be just that, a place of judgment with no reward apart from the mercy of God. How the believer shows mercy (in context being consistent with the faith of our Lord Jesus) will be a factor at the Judgment Seat. Mercy and Judgment are the topics in verse thirteen. Let us be thankful for the last statement, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” Before we project v. 13 to the future totally, the context is very NOW. Unless the believer shows mercy, compassion, etc. fulfilling the Royal Law (an outworking of looking intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, i.e., the Word of God, Jas. 1:25), there will be no PERSONAL BLESSING, neither will PEOPLE BENEFIT.

James now asks the obvious questions in verse fourteen, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? The Greek phrase translated “what use is it?” is repeated at the end of verse 16 “what use is that?” We must ask the question “what use is it (to WHOM)?” In the context of “loving your neighbor as yourself” and the illustration in vv. 15 and 16, the WHOM is clearly your NEIGHBOR, or the brother or sister in NEED. Of course let us not forget the POOR man spoken of earlier. Whenever a believer chooses not to act on what he says, it is inconsistent with the faith of our Lord Jesus, and those in need receive no benefit.

And now, to the second question, “can that faith save him?” Being honest with the text the expected answer is NO! Some translators have read in “can that (kind of) faith save him?” Again this puts the emphasis on the quality of faith and the proponents of this view would say a non-productive faith cannot regenerate. It is important to note that James does not challenge the readers’ regeneration (that is a given), but is exhorting them in the Christian life. The emphasis in the text is “can faith without works save?” A possible answer (technically accurate) is that one is not saved BY faith, but BY Grace THROUGH faith. So faith alone is not how one is saved. The context gives a better answer. First, the Bible is clear in many, many places that salvation is by faith alone (Rom. 3:28), faith being the human factor. When looking at scripture as a whole, we can conclude that the answer to the question “can faith without works save?” is a resounding YES if the issue is justification before God (going to heaven).

However, the answer to that same question in the Book of James is NO. Is this not a contradiction? In the same way that we asked a question of the first question “what use is it?” we must apply this approach again. To the question “can that faith save him”, we must ask “from what?” The word salvation means deliverance and the context must determine what the deliverance is from. For example, Romans 1:16 reads “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for SALVATION (deliverance from eternal damnation) to everyone who BELIEVES, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Romans 5:10 reads “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life”. The salvation spoken here in the second phrase (“by His life”) refers to deliverance from day to day attacks in this present evil age, and, by extension, to Sanctification. His life on earth had no atoning value, only preparation for the high priestly sacrifice that paid for sin.

He, our Lord Jesus, is presently seated at the Father's right hand in the Roles of Intercessor (Rom. 8:34) and Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1). We are at present being delivered. Again, in Rom. 5:9 we read "Much more then, having now been justified (declared righteous) by His blood, we shall be saved (future ultimate deliverance, or Glorification) from the wrath of God through Him. In Acts 2:40 Peter exhorted the believing Jews to ". . . Be saved from (delivered from approaching temporal judgment which was coming upon) this perverse generation." In Acts 27:31 Paul said ". . . Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved." Certainly one does not enter heaven by remaining in a ship, so the salvation in this context is deliverance from drowning.

Going back to the question in James, "can that faith save (deliver) him (from what?), the what in context is temporal judgment or present discipline in the believer's life. Remember verse 13, "For Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy." Showing mercy is consistent with the faith of our Lord Jesus. To not show mercy brings judgment (discipline in the life, loss of temporal blessing, and in the future loss of reward at the Judgment Seat, loss of millennial and eternal inheritance).

2. The word "dead" in verse seventeen is to be understood as inoperative or non-productive. Faith in this sense benefits no one. It will not deliver the believer from temporal judgment, nor will it provide help for those in need. Understanding "dead" in verse 17 as inoperative becomes clear when comparing verse 20 and verse 26. In v. 17 and v. 26 we see the phrase "faith . . . is dead." In Romans 7:8 we read "But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind, for apart from the Law sin is DEAD." Does that mean that sin did not exist apart from the Law? Most certainly not. Everyone (except Enoch) died from Adam to Moses demonstrating the principle of Rom. 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death . . ." It means that sin operated fully, expressed itself fully when there was a stated standard. The law agitates or stirs up the sin capacity. It makes it come alive to its fullest. Sin did not operate at its fullest apart from the law, but it certainly existed.

In like fashion, faith is dead (inoperative, is not operating at its fullest) if it has no works. Verse twenty makes it even clearer. It ends with this phrase: "faith without works is useless." Verse twenty-six ends with this phrase: "faith without works is dead." James simply says the same thing two different ways. If a believer's faith is not being expressed through good works, what good is it in terms of blessing or benefit? It is dead, meaning useless.

3. James next uses the faith of demons to illustrate his point. If faith is to be benefited from, it must be expressed in some fashion. Again, recall that v. 8 (royal law) is the key verse. James says that if they are fulfilling the royal law, ". . . you are doing well." In verse nineteen he says "You believe that God is one. You do well . . ." James is not criticizing, but complimenting. They do well by believing certain things, but faith without expression (works) is useless. He uses the demons to say that even they express their faith. The expression in this passage is that they shudder or tremble. That is the outward expression of their faith. The benefit (supposed benefit for Satan) derived from demonic faith is seen in the unsaved staying unsaved and in the saved acting unsaved. Neither Satan nor his demons can thwart the plan of God, but we know from Scripture that many for whom Christ died will be eternally lost. No doubt there will be much trembling (most likely the mildest consequence for rejecting the savior) for those who die without trusting Christ.

Demons shudder/tremble because they do believe. They know the gospel. They were there when the gospel was taking place 2000 years ago. They know that the lake of fire is their future. They know and believe Matthew 25:41. If one desires to talk about a quality of faith, the demons really, truly, sincerely, deeply, without reservation, with their whole being BELIEVE in the Lord Jesus Christ, but all in vain. The Lord Jesus bypassed the angelic realm and became like unto Adam, yet without sin, that He might redeem fallen humanity, not fallen angels. Biblically, there is no salvation provision for the angels that chose to follow Lucifer. Notice the demons response to Jesus in Matthew 8:29- ". . . Have You come

here to torment us before the time?” The demons are well aware of their future punishment. Because they do believe this, one of the expressions of their faith is that they shudder/tremble.

4. The question of justification by works is now addressed with the illustrations of Father Abraham and the harlot, Rahab. Verse 21 reads “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?” To this question the answer must be YES. Verse 24 says “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” The answer again surfaces when searching the Scripture and allowing It to say what It says. Romans 4:2 reads “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God” (cross reference Eph. 2:8-9). Justification is a declaration of righteousness. In terms of eternity it is God who is both Just and the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). God declares perfection (Righteous) throughout ETERNITY while by the Spirit’s power we attempt to live out this righteousness in TIME. WORKS IN THE CHRISTIAN’S LIFE BRING ABOUT A JUSTIFICATION IN FRONT OF MAN. We express our faith (ie, we justify our claim to being saved) through good works.

To fully understand how Abraham was justified by works according to James, we must visit Genesis for the answer. Genesis 12 gives us the promise that Abraham would be blessed and a blessing to all the families of the earth. Abraham comes into the land of Promise at the tender age of 75. With him comes a wife and servants, but no SEED. In Gen. 12:7 it says that “. . . he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. Again in verse 8 it says “Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel . . . and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.” In Gen. 13:4 we again read that after a departure into Egypt Abram returned “to the place of the altar . . . and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.” May I suggest that Abram is at this point already in a relationship with God (saved).

First, his leaving Ur in Mesopotamia is an act of obedience. Secondly, he built altars unto the LORD. This serves as a witness to the One True God on behalf of those in the land. Gen. 12:6 states “. . . Now the Canaanite was then in the land.” Also we read in Gen. 13:7 “. . . Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land.” Thirdly, Abram called upon the name of the LORD. The phrase “called upon” indicates a relationship that allowed him to call out to his God. Fourthly, the use of the word LORD (all Caps) speaks of the great “I AM” (Jehovah), the personal name of God.

Finally, Abram expresses wisdom in dealing with Lot, allowing him to choose, eliminating the strife between their herdsmen. It is after this that God reiterates His promise to Abram. Genesis 15 gives us the ratification of the promise, or the covenant. Still without seed, God tells him to count the stars and says, “. . . So shall your descendants be.” Verse 6 reads “Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” We can conclude that even if Abram were not saved (justified/declared righteous) in Ur, He without question is justified in Genesis 15.

James uses this quotation (15:6) when using Abraham as an illustration, but he relates it to offering his son Isaac as the fulfillment of this scripture and the perfecting (maturing) of his faith. We do not read of the offering of Isaac until Genesis 22. Because of some of the statements in Ch. 22, Isaac was old enough to carry the wood for the burnt offering up Mount Moriah. Some years had passed since Abraham’s declaration of righteousness. At that point Sarah was not yet with child, but in Ch. 22, Isaac is the wood bearer. The point is that James’ use of Abraham takes place a number of years after he was justified by God on the basis of faith alone. James speaks of a work demonstrating a perfected faith, a mature faith, a faith expressed by a man who had walked with the LORD for many years.

My question to those who would re-define faith is this: When was Abraham justified in terms of eternity? Was it when he offered up his son? Certainly not!! Eternal justification (by faith alone) happened years before. Eternal justification is justification before God.

What James alludes to is temporal justification (by works), which takes place throughout the Christian life sojourn. James gives an illustration of how Abraham's ". . . faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected" (speaks of maturity) v. 22. Abraham expressed his faith by walking in obedience, doing the works of God. His servants saw and declared him justified (by works). All who knew Abraham and of this event (certainly something this significant would have been spread abroad) declared him justified (by works). All who have ever read his story (Moses wrote it, David, Elijah, Gideon, Daniel, Malachi, Paul, Apollos, all the saints during the church age, even you) have declared him justified (by works).

5. James uses Rahab as the next illustration. She, too, was justified by works. Verse 25 reads "And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" Joshua, chapter two tells the story of the two messengers hidden by Rahab. Her testimony of faith is recorded in Joshua 2: 9-11. The power of Israel's God has preceded them. The people of Jericho are aware of the Red Sea crossing and Israel's victories over the Amorite kings. Rahab tells the spies in verse eleven ". . . for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath." The hiding of the spies was an expression of works working with her faith. Her good work benefited the messengers. The Scripture speaks strongly against lying (which she did in order to conceal the messengers of God); however, we see in Hebrews that she is listed in the Hall of Faith. The lie is never addressed, but concerning her good work we read "By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace" (Heb. 11:31). Because of her faith at work, Rahab (along with all who were in her house) was spared. Not only was she spared, she lived in the midst of Israel (see Josh. 6:25).

How Sovereign and Gracious is the good hand of our Lord, for Rahab the harlot becomes the wife of Salmon. Not many people know who Salmon was, but he and Rahab had a child named Boaz who married Ruth. They had a son named Obed, who fathered a son named Jesse, who fathered a son named David. That's the David that killed a lion, a bear, and a giant named Goliath. That's the David who became the King of Israel. To King David God promised a greater Son who will one day rule and reign forever. The angel Gabriel told Mary "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 2:32,33). Who would have ever thought that in the mind of God Rahab, the harlot, would be in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:5)? Before and by man she was justified by her works.

6. James concludes this section (v. 26) using the body as an illustration. He says "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." As we conclude our discussion, think back to the issue of faith. Those who would re-define faith as a working versus a non-working faith to determine the genuineness of someone's salvation lose the argument with this verse. Their theology says that if works do not accompany faith, then that is proof that personal faith never existed. Is that what this illustration teaches? Most everyone has visited a funeral home and viewed the body of someone who was a family member or friend. The body is present, it exists. In fact, it serves as evidence that a body that had life only days before is now dead. How could one stand before a dead body and say "this body never existed, it does not exist now." The body is very present. The spirit is missing. See the analogy. James equates the body with faith and the spirit with works. He is saying that the body minus the spirit equals death. In the same manner faith minus works equals death. That which gave the body its fullest expression of physical life was the spirit. Without the spirit the body still exists, but it is inoperative. The body cannot express itself apart from the spirit. Applying the equation in the spiritual realm we see that that which gives faith its fullest expression of spiritual life is works. Without the works faith still exists, but it is inoperative. Faith cannot express itself apart from works.

In summary, James tells his readers in chapter two, first of all, that they should hold their faith in Jesus Christ without distinction in their relationships with others. They are to show no partiality. Then, in a much misunderstood section, James exhorts his readers to express their faith through the avenue of good works. If we do this we will bring both blessing and benefit; blessing to ourselves personally and benefit to other people as their needs are met. James' teaching does not contradict that of the Apostle Paul with regard to salvation of our soul, as a careful analysis has shown. Rather James leaves a lasting impression of the importance of Believers maintaining works consistent with their profession. Good works are things other people can see, while they can't see our faith. The book of James is thus a very practical book.