

Faith Works: The Book of James
Overview of James
January 8, 2023

If you'll do a bit of time—traveling with me, let's go back to what I consider to be a sad day for Western Civilization: the advent of email. When email first took off—in the mid to late 90s—some saw an opportunity. You'd get this mass email—at that time called chain email—that said something like this, “If you truly love Jesus, you'll forward this email to seven of your friends.” Of course, that's a false dilemma. You *can* love Jesus without forwarding that particular email. You might even be loving Him by *not* forwarding.

That kind of false dilemma isn't limited to the late 90s, of course. Maybe you've experienced this. Two options are presented. Those are supposedly the *only* two options in the universe. And of course, they're mutually exclusive. Rather than “both/and,” “either/or” is the *only* path. Some call this the false dilemma. Some call it a false dichotomy. Others call it the bifurcation fallacy. Two roads diverge in a yellow wood, and you cannot travel both.

Welcome to the way some think of faith and works. And for that reason, to the way some think of James and Paul. In their mind, faith and works are mutually exclusive in all respects. Let's be crystal clear: no one can be justified—declared righteous—by the works of the Law. Ephesians 2:8: **For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.** God's holy. We're not close to it. Even the best of our good deeds would never be good enough. James himself writes that if we stumble at one point of the Law, we're guilty of breaking it all (James 2:10). As the hymnwriter sang, “The best obedience of my hands dares not appear before Thy throne; but faith can answer Thy demands by pleading what My Lord has done.”¹ Romans 3:28: **A man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.**

No one can be justified—declared righteous—by works. That's true. But it's also true—and it *can* also *be* true—that **faith without works is dead** (James 2:26). We just read Ephesians 2:8–9. That's what many of us memorized. But we can and should also read the next verse, verse 10: **For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them** (Eph. 2:10). So, we can and should believe Romans 4; we're saved by faith, and faith alone. But we also can and should believe Romans 12–16. The faith that saves is never alone. The fruit of saving faith—the evidence of us having trusted Christ's work—is a transformed life. As much as any other book in the New Testament, James forces us to think about this reality. Rather than “either/or,” he's clear: “both/and.”

We're overviewing the book today, and we'll do so with three questions: (1) What is the background for this book? (2) What does it say? (3) Why does it matter?

1. What is the background for the book of James?

There are quite a few men named James in the New Testament. For example, Acts 1:13 mentions three of them in one verse. James the son of Zebedee might be the most well-known, belonging to Jesus' inner circle along with Peter and John. He's with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He's with Jesus often. Yet, in Acts 12, that James is martyred by Herod Agrippa. Then a couple chapters later, in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council, a different James seems to be helping lead the Jerusalem

¹ Isaac Watts, “I Boast No More”

church (Acts 15:13ff). This is James the brother of Jesus, mentioned by Paul in Galatians 1:19. This is, most likely, the James that wrote this book.²

When and to whom did he write this book? It's possible that the book of James is the oldest book in the New Testament,³ maybe even written before the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.⁴ Because James seems to be addressing Jewish Christians, it's plausible that he's writing those that had been scattered by persecution earlier in the book of Acts. As you recall from our study, Saul was ravaging the Jerusalem church, dragging men and women from their homes and committing them to prison, or worse (Acts 8:3). Stephen is martyred. And, then, Acts 11:19 describes a certain group of people, **those that were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.** That persecution happened in Jerusalem, among predominantly Jewish Christians. They were scattered. Now hear James 1:1: **To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.**

Are we absolutely certain these are the same people? No, but it fits the time frame and makes sense of much of the evidence.⁵ If James had been one of their elders, don't you think he continued to be concerned for them, those that had belonged to the Jerusalem church pictured in Acts 2?⁶ Further, when we look at the letter itself, this group of people seems to align with the passages that describe a challenging environment. Consider, as Jewish people, they would've been alienated from the pagan world to some degree. And, to exacerbate that, as Jewish *Christians* there would've been tension with the Jewish community they'd grown up around.

So, what's the background to this letter? James the brother of Jesus—a leader in the Jerusalem church—wrote this letter in the mid to late 40s to a group of scattered Christians, many of whom had grown up in the Jewish Synagogue.

To be clear, I didn't spend a ton of time on the background because—unlike Paul's letter to the church at Colossae, or Philippi, or 1 Corinthians—James is written more broadly, to more than one congregation it seems.⁷

2. What does James say?

Or maybe, first, *how* does James say what he says? Many have called this a book of New Testament wisdom, in part because some of it reads like the Proverbs. James is concise. He often moves quickly from one subject to another. There's not always a clear connection between them, again like the Proverbs. Yet, you know there are quite a few differences between this book and the book of Proverbs. It's probably best to say that James *includes* wisdom but isn't confined to that genre.

How else does James write? He uses some of the most memorable imagery in the New Testament. Wednesday night I asked what James says about the tongue. Some of you responded, correctly, that it's a fire; it's also like the rudder of a ship (James 3:4–5). According to James's picturesque imagery, our life is a vapor (4:14), our doubting is like the surf of the sea, as we're driven and tossed about (1:6), and being a hearer but not a doer is akin to one looking into a mirror and immediately forgetting what he looks like.

There's wisdom. There's imagery. How else does James write? He's heavy on application. Unlike the balance of the Scriptures, there are loads of commands. It has a higher frequency of

² For more info, see Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, 11–32.

³ Curtis Vaughan, *James*, Founders Study Guide, 2.

⁴ Moo, 31.

⁵ Moo, 30; Leon Morris and Donald Burdick, *Hebrews/James*, EBC, 162.

⁶ Morris and Burdick, 163.

⁷ In that sense it's often called a general epistle.

imperatives than any other New Testament book.⁸ In 108 verses, there are 59 imperatives.⁹ Yet, it's not intended to be oppressive, but applicable. Keep in mind the person writing it. It's James, one of the pastors of the Jerusalem church. And as he writes these instructions, he addresses his readers as brothers and sisters 15 different times.¹⁰ He's pastoral. So, James is a book full of wisdom, full of imagery/illustrations, along with application, and it's written in pastoral terms. Maybe you can see why several scholars call the book of James a homily or a sermon.¹¹

So that's some of the *how* James writes. Now, what does he say? With a book that addresses various practicalities—one after another—it can be challenging to tie it all up in a bow with a single sentence. I won't exhaust James's sermon in this one.¹² But to hit some of the major emphases. James addressed the way these Christians spoke. Before chapter 3's extended discussion on the tongue, 1:19 instructs: **Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.** Wednesday night we talked about a biblical understanding of speech, emphasizing the way the Lord might use our speech for His purposes of encouragement/affirmation. The tongue of the wise brings healing (Prov. 12:18). But, if death and life are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21), James primarily addresses the negative aspects. When he says the tongue is a fire, he means that it, 3:6: **defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life.** It's a match on dry kindling. Ten thousand sentences can be undone by a single phrase. Is this issue one that merely plagued Jewish Christians in the first century? Of course not. We'll come back to this, but it seems as if they failed to connect—or they *actively* divided—their faith from their speech. James 3:9: **With it (their tongue) we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.**

A second emphasis raises its head in chapter 2. These believers failed to apply their faith to their relationships. James references the second greatest commandment, **You shall love your neighbor as yourself** (2:8), and then writes, **But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors** (2:9). Apparently, they'd shown favoritism toward the rich man with the ring and fine clothes (2:2). James calls this sin. And he points out the contradiction. Just like those that bless God *and* curse His image-bearers with the same tongue, some, note 2:1: **hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.** Do you hear the contradiction? James calls this sin. And he says, simply, “do not do it.”

I've hinted at this with both issues, but right in the middle of James's teaching on the dangers of favoritism and the tongue he addresses faith and works. And he makes plain that “either/or” is wrong. We'll address this in more detail when we get there, but James is not contradicting Paul.¹³ Instead, he's an important counterbalance to a *distorted* version of Paul.

Good doctrines can be distorted. In my small-town evangelical world twenty years ago, the perseverance of the saints was abused by many of my high school classmates, as well as a few pastors. In their lightweight theological construction, if you prayed a prayer, you're *definitely* saved. And *after* that prayer, you could live however you wanted for the next 50 years. Once saved, always saved. I'm not saying Sparta, TN in 1999 is a direct correlation to scattered Jewish Christians in the year 45, but I am saying that's the *kind* of thing James is confronting. You can't hold faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ while at the same time wantonly and unrepentantly living otherwise.

⁸ Moo, 1.

⁹ See Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 388.

¹⁰ Moo, 8.

¹¹ Moo, 7; Witherington, 385.

¹² That's why we're going to walk through the book.

¹³ To the degree Luther thought this, Luther was wrong. However, it might be that we've exaggerated his views by highlighting and retweeting his “strawy epistle” soundbite. Luther did not exclude James from the canon and quoted from James frequently. See Moo, 6.

Again, James says that if you merely hear and don't do, you're like a man that looks in the mirror and then immediately forgets what he looks like (James 1:23–24).

One other matter must be pointed out. Some of the reason these Jewish Christians are dividing tongue from faith, relationships from faith, and works from faith is *because* they are divided themselves. That theme—division within—runs throughout the book.¹⁴ It's not merely outward acts that James is concerned about. He, like his Lord's Sermon the Mount, knows that an understanding of God's Law shines a spotlight on what's within. So, where does James point this out? First, the person that prays with doubt is like a “double-minded” man (1:8). When James addresses the tongue and favoritism, he's concerned with purity; pure and undefiled religion is *this*. And at what many call the climax of the letter—the middle of chapter 4—James writes, **Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded** (4:8).

The right question to ask is, “What's divided them?” What's the influence—other than their faith—that's impacting the way they use their speech and the people they prioritize? James's answer is in the form of a question in chapter 4:4: **Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?** When James writes about pure and undefiled religion in chapter 1, he also means to keep **oneself unstained by the world** (1:27). The world's made its way within their minds and hearts.

When James uses “world,” he means the unbelieving world, those that do not hold faith in our glorious Lord Jesus. Are *they* quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger? Absolutely not. They never have been. But we can be influenced by them. Do they show favoritism toward the person in the finer clothes? Absolutely they do. They always have. And we can be influenced by them. The other issues James highlights—like arrogance or quarreling—are characteristics of the world that surrounded these dispersed Jewish Christians just like they surround us. James's pastoral letter has much to say about the problem of the world's influence seeping into the church.¹⁵

It's a subtle influence. And we're not immune. To what degree is what we believe, or how we act, influenced by those around us more than it is by what's been revealed by God Himself?

One final matter concerning what James says. If you're using M'Cheyne's reading plan, you read the Sermon on the Mount this week. If the book of James is a sermon, he borrows heavily from his Brother. In fact, James depends on, or alludes to, Jesus's teaching as much or more than any other New Testament book.¹⁶

3. Why does James matter?

It's a bit of a silly question. It matters because God inspired it, of course. But to be more specific, the false dilemma between faith and works is quite a significant issue, for a few reasons. First, to divide them wrongly—or act as if one isn't a fruit of the other—is a misunderstanding of the good news intrinsic to the gospel itself. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus came to save sinners. But not *merely* that He might forgive them, but that He might restore them. Our sin—and the effect of sin—afflicts us *now*. We have divided hearts. We live in the world with distracted minds. We love lesser things. He came so that little by little sin might afflict us less. He's conforming us to the image of His Son.

So, to bifurcate between faith and works is a misunderstanding of the nature of the gospel itself. Secondly, it's a misunderstanding of the God of that gospel. When He draws us, saves us in

¹⁴ I was helped in seeing this by David Gibson's *Radically Whole*. Doug Moo writes that “Spiritual ‘wholeness’ is the central concern of the letter,” 62.

¹⁵ Moo, 29.

¹⁶ Moo, 8. See the chart in Witherington, 394–395.

grace, apart from works, He does not leave us the same. The Spirit's indwelling brings life, transforming us within. That's the nature of His work. Do we think the Spirit moves in and nothing changes?

To divide faith and works is a misunderstanding of the gospel's efficacy, a misunderstanding of the work of the Spirit, and it's a misunderstanding of Christ's person. 1 Corinthians 15:7 tells us that James saw the resurrected Jesus, his brother.¹⁷ The resurrected Christ appeared to James. And James bent the knee. James saw the same Christ that Paul did. And in this letter he calls Him the **glorious Lord Jesus Christ** (2:1). Again, He's not merely our Savior; we confess Him as Lord. He has say over what I say. He rules over my relationships. And He can tell me how to live because He's done it. No one's ever been more single-minded, united in heart, intent on a single purpose. The world didn't affect His obedience. His obedience affected the world.

Because, though our divided affections leave us exhausted, James doesn't leave us there. God gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). If we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us (4:8). And if we humble ourselves, He will exalt us (4:10). In fact, as we'll see next week, the testing of our faith will have a perfect result: that we may be complete (1:4).

Conclusion

Faith works. That means at least two things. First, there's no false dilemma. Faith works. The Spirit transforms us; we bow our hearts to Christ as Lord; and we follow Him. Faith works *through* us. But faith works also means that faith works *in* us. Faith in Christ is how God makes the double-minded, the distracted, those that love lesser things, whole.

¹⁷ See Tom Nettles and Sylvia Dickson, *A Commentary on James*, 2.