



## James Chapter Two

### Summary of Chapter Two

James opens this chapter with an account of how believers are drawn into showing partiality towards the social status of others, and thus giving preference to the wealthy and influential, while paying little heed to those of lower esteem. Therefore, James states they are guilty of judging their brothers and sisters who were created their equal and should be treated as such.

James speaks of the perfection of God's law as shown in Scripture, which now includes the teachings of Christ, and he admonishes his readership to obey the full law with regard to their own growth and love for neighbour. He teaches that believers must speak and act in accordance with the law of freedom, and with a view to the coming judgment.

James turns his attention to the correlation between faith and works. He does not say that salvation is by works but by faith. However, true faith will be demonstrated by the associated deeds that naturally accompany that faith.

In his argument on faith, James draws on two historical accounts from the OT: Abraham and Rahab, very different people, drawn from different ends of the social spectrum, but both who had faith in the promises and power of God, with their subsequent actions reflecting that faith.

### **IV James 2:1-13 - Favouritism Forbidden**

The problem of the poor and the rich, already emphasised by James in: <<*The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business*>> (James 1:9-11), and: <<*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*>> (James 1:27), now comes to centre stage with this warning about discriminating against the poor in favour of the wealthy in church.

#### IV.a James 2:1-7 - Preferring the wealthy over the poor in the assembly

James shows the fundamental incompatibility of holding faith in Christ and showing partiality among people. Favouritism does not fit with a righteous God who shows no partiality and had especially called on his people to care for the widow and the orphan. Peter agrees with James: <<**Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear**>> (1 Peter 1:17), and: <<**Then Peter began to speak: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism**>> (Acts 10:34), where Peter shows acceptance of Gentiles into the church along with the Jews. Paul also writes on the subject of partiality: <<**For God does not show favouritism**>> (Romans 2:11), <<**And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him**>> (Ephesians 6:9), and: <<**Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism**>> (Colossians 3:25). Favouritism is a clear contradiction to true faith, a key theme of the whole letter and uppermost in James mind throughout. Paul wrote to Philemon concerning one of his slaves, Onesimus, who had absconded and would normally have been dealt with very severely, but Paul suggests he should be accepted back as a dear brother as he belongs to Christ too: <<**Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord**>> (Philemon 15-16).

<sup>1</sup> My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism.

#### James 2:1

My brothers. It is important that James demonstrates their equality with him as fellow servants of Jesus rather than their apostle or leader, especially given the subject he is speaking about, for all are equal in the sight of God. Therefore, no one should dare to show partiality to a person who has been accepted by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Believers in the NIV translation masks the intended meaning of this verse, which is commonly translated: <<**My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory**>>, as in the ESV. Substituting faith for believers leads to a better understanding of James intention here.

Jesus, according to James, is the exalted and glorious Lord and Christ, and is always to be thought of as such. In some translations, he is called the Lord of Glory. With such a magnificent description of Christ then James makes it clear that believers, i.e. those who have faith in Jesus as their Christ, cannot show partiality as the two elements contradict each other. To favour the wealth of the rich is to show faith in that wealth rather than in Jesus as Lord. It is faith in God alone that is of true value!

Favouritism, or partiality as you hold the faith in some translations, is plural in the Greek, indicating James has multiple types of partiality in mind. There is no place

for prejudice in the life of faith. Favouritism combines a group of terms signifying to accept or judge according to face value, and refers to favouritism shown on the basis of status in society.

<sup>2</sup> Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. <sup>3</sup> If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” <sup>4</sup> have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

### James 2:2-4

Meeting or assembly uses the Greek word Synagōgē, and probably refers to a Christian house church. The choice of word here lends support that James intended readership had a Jewish background, as he was so familiar with religious gatherings in the synagogue. Although some commentators believe James is referring to a judicial setting rather than a church meeting, hence the comments about judging and also the absence of the Greek word ekklesia, used most often for Christian gatherings. However, the evidence is inconclusive. Overall, James teaching seems to fit better with a church gathering.

This passage also indicates a certain openness about the meeting which, given the persecution and oppression that James speaks of, shows that these early Christians were not afraid to be publically recognised for who they were in terms of their faith.

Here two types of people arrive: one wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and another with shabby clothes. The wealthy person is told to sit in a good seat, a place of honour, perhaps in the front, while the poor person is shown contempt and told either to stand, probably at the back, or sit on the floor by my feet as a servant would.

Jesus had criticised the religious leaders of loving the places of honour at such gatherings: <<***Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets***>> (Luke 20:46). Jesus instructs his followers to be different: <<***Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”***>> (Matthew 20:25-28).

Those who make such distinctions show themselves to be judges with evil thoughts. Christians are not to judge each other: <<***Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your***>>

*eye, when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye>> (Matthew 7:1-5), and: <<Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand>> (Romans 14:4), although Paul suggests: <<What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?>> (1 Corinthians 5:12), meaning that church leaders are to give proper instruction to members of their flock that are not following Gospel teaching. For ordinary believers to judge others can only mean their minds are consumed with evil thoughts, Greek dialogismos, which can mean opinions, reasoning, or conclusions. God had highlighted this despicable human attribute before: <<The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time>> (Genesis 6:5), in a verse that demonstrates it was not a natural inclination at creation.*

The example from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 7 recently quoted can be seen as the background to what James is speaking of here. If Christian believers do show partiality in the way he alludes to then they forfeit the right to teach others in the assembly, until they are able to remove the 'plank' of favouritism from their own 'eyes' and hearts.

It should be noted that James is in no way promoting civil disobedience or rudeness. It is only right to show appropriate respect to those in positions of authority, either in the church or in the world. Likewise, those who are in eminent positions can still show respect to those who are not, despite their poverty or lower status. This is particularly essential between fellow believers.

<sup>5</sup> Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

### James 2:5

Dear brothers is a warm greeting, showing the acceptance of, and genuine affection for others in the faith on an equal basis even though James was considered to be an apostle and was a church leader. Paul addresses the church in Corinth in the same way: <<Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain>> (1 Corinthians 15:58). The Jewish custom was normally to call someone of equal status simply brother and an elder father, as in the days of King Hezekiah: <<Do not be like your fathers and brothers, who were unfaithful to the Lord, the God of their fathers, so that he made them an object of horror>> (2 Chronicles 30:7), Stephen before the Sanhedrin: <<To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran">> (Acts 7:2), and Paul before the angry mob in Jerusalem: <<"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defence">> (Acts 22:1).

Has not God chosen those who are poor. Any person who rejects a person that

God has chosen whether based on their social status or any other personal attribute is, in essence, rejecting God himself! The reader must be careful not to interpret this passage as saying that God loves the poor more than the rich for that would imply the very partiality that is being denied in God. It is because they are poor in terms of worldly wealth that they can truly appreciate the rich rewards of everlasting salvation. It is more a case of winning over the winnable!

Chosen to be rich in faith. Alluding again to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, and using the language of election, James declares that those who are poor in the eyes of the world have a special place in God's economy of salvation. They are rich in an eternal sense because they are heirs of the kingdom: <<*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*>> (Matthew 5:3).

Inherit the kingdom he promised. Some believers may have been chosen to be poor in this life as part of their testing, and indeed as part of their witness to God, but their reward is of equal greatness to that of a wealthy believer, and eternally far superior to that which awaits the richest and most powerful of unbelievers: <<*Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world'*>> (Matthew 25:34). God may bestow kingdoms to men on earth but these are temporal and inferior in comparison: <<*This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you – may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem'*>> (Ezra 1:2-3).

What James is showing, with regard to the rich/poor issue, is not some profound theological statement that God favours poor people, but that the wealthy tend to have weaker faith as they put their trust in their wealth rather than in God. Jesus had observed that: <<*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*>> (Mark 10:25), and: <<*Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"*>> (Luke 6:20). This ties in with the OT commands of God: <<*He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing*>> (Deuteronomy 10:18), and the economic situation of the majority of his readers.

<sup>6</sup> But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? <sup>7</sup> Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

### James 2:6-7

Insulted the poor. Any wealthy or influential believer, who does not accept a poor believer as his equal is insulting him. In addition, he insults God who has chosen and accepted that poor person to himself just as he is. God is no respecter of social status but treats everyone with equality according to their heart. Fellow believers are called to emulate this attribute of God.

**Exploiting you.** This oppression, or exploitation, reflects a situation of radical social polarisation in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, with merchants and landowners, some of them claiming to be Christian, taking land and possessions from **the poor** (James 5:1-6). James challenges his Christian readers as to why they would honour the rich in the assembly when it is **the rich** unbelievers of the world, who blaspheme or **slander the noble name** of Christ, indicating that poor believers faced religious persecution as well.

**Dragging you into court.** As frequently recorded in the OT: <<*Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, “Bring us some drinks!”*>> (Amos 4:1), <<*Therefore the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted*>> (Habakkuk 1:4), and: <<*“So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the Lord Almighty*>> (Malachi 3:5), the wealthy often used the **court** system to steal from the poor, for their judges were often from the same noble classes and were corrupt: <<*And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment – wickedness was there, in the place of justice – wickedness was there*>> (Ecclesiastes 3:16). This situation was the primary reason for the revolts in Galilee that led to the disastrous Jewish-Roman war of AD66-70. This analogy shows the folly of favouring the rich just because of their wealth. They should, of course, be accepted as equal brothers if they have faith in Christ or are seekers of the faith.

**Slandering the noble name.** Every time a believer brings disrepute on himself then he brings disrepute on the Lord and Christ he claims to serve and follow. Unbelievers who persecute disciples are also persecuting and slandering God, as did Paul when he encountered the Risen Lord on the Damascus Road: <<*As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied*>> (Acts 9:3-5).

**To whom you belong.** Although they are called brothers of Christ, believers should never forget that Christ paid the ransom price for their redemption and therefore becomes their spiritual owner. He also owns them physically as their creator.

#### IV.b **James 2:8-11 - The royal law of love**

Favouritism and discrimination are violations of the kingdom law of love. Any single violation is seen as total violation in the eyes of God. Although faith is not mentioned in this section, it has already been seen as opposing favouritism, which itself opposes the moral law: <<*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 19:18).

<sup>8</sup> If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right.

### James 2:8

If you really keep the royal law shows that there is no half-way house when it comes to God’s economy. A person cannot interpret the law with partiality; he either keeps God’s statutes or he doesn’t, although the law James is referring to is the moral law of God rather than the legalistic Mosaic Law.

Royal law, Greek basilikos, i.e. law belonging to the king, which is a reference here to God’s law, the law of the King of kings. As was noted in the section introduction and repeated by James, Leviticus 19:18b states: <<**love your neighbour**>>, the importance of which is also confirmed in the teachings of Jesus, who shows it to be the apex of kingdom rules for ethical conduct: <<**On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered: ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live”>> (Luke 10:25-28).**

Love your neighbour as yourself. Not surprisingly, Paul teaches the same principles as James and Jesus on this: <<**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law**>> (Romans 13:8-10). James is not saying that this royal law supersedes the law of God, but rather it extends and enhances it in a new way for Christ has fulfilled the law: <<**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them**>> (Matthew 5:17). The ceremonial practices are no longer required but the morality of the law is to be maintained and increased.

Love your neighbour, you are doing right: True love for a neighbour does not take any account of their social status or level of wealth, their gender, sexuality, ethnic origin, skin colour, mental capacity, or any other human quality, or even their faith, but ensures that a believer does what is right by their neighbour. Trying to avoid accepting this, an expert in the law was discussing this with Jesus: <<**But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”>> (Luke 10:29). Jesus then told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where both a priest and a Levite did not help a fellow Jew who had been mugged, but a Samaritan, a race despised by the Jews, gave the poor man every assistance. That is what Jesus means by being a neighbour. If someone is in trouble then the church should respond as if they were in it together with the sufferer and do whatever they can to help the one in need.**

<sup>9</sup> But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

## James 2:9

**Favouritism** is the antithesis of the love command in v.8. **Favouritism** toward the rich breaks the OT commands, and those doing so are thus failing to treat the poor equitably and **are convicted by the law as lawbreakers**: <<*Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly*>> (Leviticus 19:15), <<*Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous*>> (Deuteronomy 16:19), and: <<*Is he not the One who says to kings, 'You are worthless,' and to nobles, 'You are wicked,' who shows no partiality to princes and does not favour the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands*>> (Job 34:18-19), for it is a serious transgression of God's law.

<sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. <sup>11</sup> For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

## James 2:10-11

**Guilty of breaking all of it.** The law was considered an interdependent whole, and any infraction constituted a breaking of the law as a whole, as Paul confirms: <<*Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law*>> (Galatians 5:3). Jesus said: <<*I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished*>> (Matthew 5:18). Thus favouritism in v.9 makes one accountable or **guilty**, Greek *enochos*, which is a legal term for liable before God's court, for **the whole law**. Those who choose to follow Jesus must now commit to keeping the whole of his royal law - the Gospel. As previously stated, people cannot pick and choose which parts of the Gospel they wish to apply to their lives and which they will ignore.

**If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.** James again shows that it is the whole law that must be kept as breaking one command means a person has broken the whole law: <<*All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law"*>> (Galatians 3:10). Although James uses examples from the Ten Commandments, the same principle applies to all transgressions as God does not grade sin.

Since God does not show favouritism then we can conclude that it is not so much equality that he shows but it is his mercy, through the atoning blood of Christ, which is the opposite of favouritism. The essence of mercy, from a believer's perspective is reflected once again in Jesus' teaching: <<*For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*>> (Matthew 6:14-15). Mercy must and will replace discrimination as the way of life for people of faith.

It has been by now repeatedly evident that James' emphasis on the law is thoroughly Christian. His moral earnestness is rooted in redemption. For the law he prescribes is emphatically Christ's law. And that law requires mercy in believers, because those who are believers in Christ look in faith for mercy from God.

#### IV.c James 2:12-13 - Acting in light of judgment

Believers must speak and act in accordance with the law of freedom and with a view to the coming judgment. This teaches believers that they should not only look on their poorer brothers and sisters as their equals, but should be moved to compassion for them, and then to show the appropriate loving action as required.

<sup>12</sup> Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,

##### James 2:12

The law that gives freedom. True freedom is freedom to obey God and do what pleases him. The law referred to here is not the Law of Moses but that of Christ, which provides true freedom from sin and corruption through the Gospel: <<***So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed***>> (John 8:36). Unlike the burden that the OT law had become to the Jews because of their continuing apostasy or misinterpretation and inappropriate application of the law over many generations, this new yoke is not burdensome: <<***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”***>> (Matthew 11:28-30).

In the context of James' discussion of rich and poor in vv.1-7, he may also be suggesting that God's law will set the poor free from prejudice, oppression, and exploitation.

Every person, believers and non-believers, will be judged by God: <<***If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames***>> (1 Corinthians 3:12-15), <<***For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad***>> (2 Corinthians 5:10), and: <<***Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear***>> (1 Peter 1:17).

Judged by the law. The law that men will be judged by will be the law of Christ, the Gospel, which will be one of the books that will be opened on that great and equally dreadful day: <<***And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books***>> (Revelation 20:12).

<sup>13</sup> because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

### James 2:13

Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. This proverbial saying sums up the implications of vv.1-12 and leads into the 'faith without works' discussion in vv.14-26. It was the core of Roman law, i.e. lex talionis, or the law of retribution, but more importantly it is central to God's law: what you do to others will be done to you in the judgment; that is, rewarded for good and punished for evil.

Mercy triumphs over judgment does not, in this context, mean that God's mercy is extended to believers at the judgment. Rather, believers' acts of mercy, e.g. caring for the poor, the orphan, the widow and the hurting, will mean that they are vindicated at the judgment: <<*Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'*>> (Matthew 25:34-40).

Mercy was an essential OT requirement for dealing with the poor: <<*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*>> (Micah 6:8), and: <<*This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other'*>> (Zechariah 7:9-10).

Mercy is likewise a requirement of believers in the NT: <<*Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'*>> (Matthew 18:32-33), or they will experience God's judgment rather than his mercy.

## **V James 2:14-26 - Faith and Deeds**

James continues the theme that hearing and faith must lead to doing and works. Although it may seem as if James is contradicting Paul: <<*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast*>> (Ephesians 2:8-9), in reality there is no dichotomy between faith and works, for Paul and James would agree that the basis of salvation is grace alone through faith, with works not the basis but the necessary result thereof: <<*For we are God's workmanship, created in*

*Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do>>*  
(Ephesians 2:10).

#### V.a James 2:14-17 - Faith without works

Faith that is not accompanied by action is useless and dead, unable to save, i.e. is not true saving faith in the first place. Having dealt with an example of faith in practice through non-discrimination, it is a natural flow of thought for James now to draw this together by explaining the theological unity of faith and actions. He argues his case first with logic.

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

#### James 2:14

What good is it? The form of the question indicates that a negative answer, that is, no good whatsoever, is anticipated. The Greek particle *mē* at the beginning of the next question: can such faith save him? shows that James again expects a negative answer. If someone says he has faith but lacks the resulting evidential works, one must doubt that he has been truly saved. James is not implying that even genuine faith is the basis of salvation; rather, it is the means and instrument by which one is saved as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9. Refer to the major section introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

#### James 2:15-16

This is an illustration of what faith without works looks like in everyday life. In itself the phrase: go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed is a pious wish and prayer for the welfare of the poor, but in reality it is a cop-out, masking a refusal to help the person in need. What good is it, Greek *ophelos*, which means profit or honour, in such a prayer.

The uselessness of this response is so obvious and offensive that James needs only to repeat his first rhetorical question: What good is it? James expects that faith will surely lead to actions to meet the material needs of others. What good is it? frames vv.14-16.

<sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

#### James 2:17

Faith by itself, is dead. This is another verse where opponents of the faith claim there are conflicts in Scripture, for the apostle Paul writes frequently that salvation is by faith alone. These are not conflicts but complimentary statements, for the types of work that are in view by the two men are different although the faith is the same, for Paul also writes: <<*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision*

*nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love>> (Galatians 5:6), <<We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ>> (1 Thessalonians 1:3), and: <<This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone>> (Titus 3:8).*

Not accompanied by action. Salvation comes through faith, which in turn is authenticated by the actions that naturally follow from true faith. Paul concurs: <<For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do>> (Ephesians 2:8-10).

When carefully studied, all these apparent conflicts are easily reconciled to give an holistic Gospel account. If only it were so easy to reconcile the conflicts between believers and, indeed, between churches!

Dead that is, useless, without any life at all. It brings no results, and cannot lead to salvation (v.14). There can be no true or authentic faith that fails to produce works, here seen as care for the poor, but including good works of all kinds.

#### V.b James 2:18-20 - Response of a critic

An objector argues that faith and works are indeed separable, and James responds that faith can be shown only through righteous deeds. James repudiates any separation of faith and deeds - the two go naturally together although faith in Christ is the driving force.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

#### James 2:18

But someone will say. As was common in Hellenistic rhetoric, James introduces a hypothetical respondent or interlocutor into his discussion of faith and works or deeds, continuing his argument against those who think that faith can save without a natural outworking through such deeds. Deeds in this context means some form of action to positively resolve a problem or issue as a result of a person’s faith.

<sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

#### James 2:19

You believe. This startling example shows just how much difference there is between belief and faith. Many people believe God exists but believing in Christ as

God with trust and obedience is the essence of the Christian faith.

One God or God is one in some translations. This affirmation of monotheism stems from the core Jewish creed called the Shema: <<*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one*>> (Deuteronomy 6:4), which Jesus confirms as being of the utmost importance: <<*“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’>> (Mark 12:29). Paul writes: <<*Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith*>> (Romans 3:30), showing quite clearly that having a Triune God means there is still just one God but manifested in three distinct persons.*

But James stresses its inadequacy, since even the demons believe that – and shudder; and no one claiming to have Christian faith could dismiss this as a trivial example, which is not hypothetical but based on historical events, such as: <<*Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee*>> (Mark 1:23-28).

James indicates that mere mental assent to the Christian faith does not save anyone. The faith that saves, as both Paul and James affirm, embraces the truth of the Gospel and acts accordingly.

<sup>20</sup> You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

### James 2:20

You foolish man. This is the someone who posed the question in v.18. Jesus had warned: <<*But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell*>> (Matthew 5:22), but that does not apply to James here as Jesus was implying the judgement would be against those who use the term fool to personally insult or deride someone, whereas James is using it as a genuine rebuke.

Jesus had spoken in a similar vein to the teachers of the law and Pharisees: <<*“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath’>> (Matthew 23:16-18), and Paul uses it to those in Galatia who were turning from the freedom in Christ to the teachings of the circumcision group: <<*You foolish**

**Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified>>** (Galatians 3:1). Jesus also attributes it to God himself: **<<But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’>>** (Luke 12:20).

The point is that believing the truth without obeying the truth does not save anyone at all, any more than it saves demons. In fact, the comparison to demonic faith implies that belief without obedience is even worse than useless.

The whole essence of the Christian faith is that it is acceptance of what is unseen. Therefore, anyone who needs evidence is clearly lacking in faith in the first place!

Faith without deeds is useless. It is faith in God through Jesus that brings the reward of eternal life with God. A natural outworking of genuine faith are the good deeds that a disciple of Christ produces. Without such deeds then the faith cannot be genuine and thus James can claim it to be useless.

#### V.c James 2:21-26 - Examples of Abraham and Rahab

James continues his rebuttal by citing the well documented historic examples of Abraham and Rahab, who were both shown by their deeds to be righteous.

<sup>21</sup> Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

#### James 2:21

Ancestor Abraham. God had called Abraham some two thousand years earlier out of his homeland of modern day Iraq to a land that was not his own, but in which he would become the biological father of a nation: **<<O Lord, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you>>** (1 Chronicles 29:18), and: **<<Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad>>** (John 8:56), but more than that, the spiritual father of all nations: **<<The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”>>** (Genesis 12:1-3).

Abraham considered righteous for what he did. On the surface James may seem to contradict Paul, who writes: **<<What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness>>** (Romans 4:1-5), where Paul is arguing from Genesis 15:6 **<<Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness>>**.

However, James' assertion in this verse that Abraham considered righteous for what he did is based not on Genesis 15:6, but on Genesis 22:9-10 where, many years later, Abraham began to offer Isaac as a sacrifice in obedience to a command from God: <<*When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son*>>. Thus James apparently has a different sense of the word righteous or justify in view here, as evidenced by the different Scripture passages, and the different events in Abraham's life, to which James and Paul refer. The writer to the Hebrews clearly demonstrates a cohesive understanding between the Pauline statement in Romans Chapter 4 and James in this passage with: <<*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death*>> (Hebrews 11:17-19). God's response was to bless Abraham, not so much for his actions, i.e. his works, but his faith in God to be willing to carry out those actions: <<*The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies*>> (Genesis 22:15-17).

The primary way in which Paul uses the word righteous, the Greek word *dikaioō*, emphasises the sense of being declared righteous by God through faith, on the basis of Jesus' atoning sacrifice: <<*This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus*>> (Romans 3:22-26), whereas the primary way that James uses the word righteous here in v.21 seems to emphasise the way in which works demonstrate that someone has been justified, as evidenced by the good works that the person does: <<*"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognised by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned"*>> (Matthew 12:33-37).

Some commentators hold a similar view, which understands righteous here to mean to declare someone to be justified because, at the final judgment, the

person's works give evidence of true saving faith. If people were sinless and perfectly obeyed all of God's perfect moral standards, they could be justified or declared righteous on the basis of their own merits. But both James and Paul say that this is impossible for any Gentile or even for any Jew to do.

<sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

### James 2:22

His faith and his actions were working together as part of one reality. Through an act based on supreme obedience undertaken in absolute faith by Abraham, James is clearly indicating that the two go hand in glove with faith coming first, and works or deeds being a natural outworking of the saving faith a believer has in Christ Jesus as Lord.

Faith was made complete by what he did. James does not disagree that faith alone saves, thus aligning with Paul's theology: <<***For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law***>> (Romans 3:28).

Complete, Greek eteleiōthē, often means perfected or bring to maturity. Full-grown and genuine faith is seen in the good deeds it produces. This describes faith as a reality that grows and matures in a Christian's life, and it gives strong motivation for doing the works, because becoming mature, Greek teleios, in faith is the goal to which James directed us in James 1:4 <<***Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything***>>.

<sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.

### James 2:23

James uses Genesis 15:6 in a way that complements rather than contradicts Paul, for he sees it as having been fulfilled in Abraham's offering of Isaac, see Genesis Chapter 22 for the full account. Here Abraham was credited with righteousness before he offered Isaac in response to God's command, which complements Paul's argument that Abraham was credited with righteousness before he was circumcised.

James centres on Abraham's act of obedience while Paul centres on God's declaration of Abraham's righteousness.

Abraham was called God's friend: <<***O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?***>> (2 Chronicles 20:7), and: <<***But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend***>> (Isaiah 41:8), in contrast to those who have no acts of obedience to prove their claims to faith and are therefore seen to be friends of this world: <<***You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God***>> (James 4:4).

<sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

### James 2:24

Not by faith alone. James again seems at first to contradict Paul's teaching that one is justified by faith alone, as recently noted in v.23 <<*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law*>> (Romans 3:28), but the two are compatible. For James, faith alone means a bogus kind of faith, mere intellectual agreement without a genuine personal trust in Christ that bears fruit in one's life.

Justified was fully discussed in comments on v.21. James, in agreement with Paul, argues that true faith is never alone, that it always produces works, as noted in the introduction to this chapter: <<*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*>> (Ephesians 2:10).

There are several lessons for believers to learn from this passage on Abraham:

1. If any believer would wish to have Abraham's blessing they must be prepared to demonstrate the same level of faith and not just claim to be of his seed, whether biological or spiritual.
2. The faith-based actions must involve self-denial or sacrifice, as required by God, and not something that is simply pleasing to human desire, serving self-interest, or are the mere fruits of the person's own imagination and devising.
3. What a believer genuinely intends and sincerely resolves to do for God is accepted as if it were actually undertaken. Thus Abraham is regarded as having offered up his son, although he did not actually make a sacrificial offering of him. It was resolved in his mind and spirit to do so, and God accepted it as if it were fully performed and accomplished.
4. The outworking of faith makes it grow perfect, as the truth of faith makes it act.
5. Such an active faith will make others, as well as Abraham, friends of God. Thus Christ says to his disciples: <<*I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you*>> (John 15:15).

<sup>25</sup> In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?

### James 2:25

Rahab the prostitute believed the accounts of God's saving work on behalf of the Hebrews: <<*Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are*

*melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below>>* (Joshua 2:8-11). So, at extreme personal risk, she hid the Jewish spies from her own people, then lowered them on a rope so they could escape: *<<So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall>>* (Joshua 2:15). Thus she became a model of faith completed in works.

She gave lodging to the spies. The king had sent men to her house to search for the spies, who she said had already left but were still with her. She allowed them to sleep on the roof of her house that night before helping them to escape, as already noted. She did this at great personal danger to herself and probably her family as well.

Sent them off in a different direction. The men of Jericho, who were searching for the Hebrew spies headed for the River Jordan to try to capture the spies, who they thought to be making for their camp, so Rahab sent them a different way to avoid capture: *<<Now she had said to them, "Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way">>* (Joshua 2:16).

This account again shows the power of faith to overcome a sinful life as we find from the account in Joshua, where her family went on to live in the camp of the Israelites following the fall of Jericho.

Some commentators hold this to be the same Rahab listed in Christ's genealogy in Matthew 1:5 as King David's great-great grandmother, which could fit time wise with those that hold to a late Exodus, circa 1200BC, but not with those who believe in an early Exodus, circa 1400BC. However, it should also be noted that Jewish genealogies have a tendency to omit some generations, especially where the parents are of little historical account. Therefore, the term 'father of' or 'son of' can be taken as 'grandfather of' or 'grandson of' respectively, or even wider generational gaps. An example comes in the genealogy of Christ in the first Gospel account, where the author evidently skipped three generations between Joram and Uzziah or Azariah in Matthew 1:8.

<sup>26</sup> As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

### James 2:26

Although the physical body may be alive it is considered spiritually dead without faith in Christ. The other apostles write in similar terms: *<<But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness>>* (Romans 8:10), and: *<<For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit>>* (1 Peter 4:6).

James uses this as the analogy to conclude and repeat that without a natural outworking of deeds, then a person's faith is of no worth, i.e. is dead. Jesus often used farming analogies in his parables and perhaps one could be applied here to faith in that, if the root is dead there can be no growth in the plant, which itself will soon become dead.

Since the Greek word pneuma means both spirit and breath, the verse could be translated 'As the body without breath is dead', which then lends itself to physical rather than spiritual death, but the overall interpretation remains the same.