

## James 2 Exegetical Notes

**The Test of Impartial Love - James 2:1-13**  
**The Test of Righteous Works - James 2:14-26**

### ***Test 4 - Impartial Love***

The empty professor is enamored of externals. Look around us today. Most of so-called Christianity is caught up in the idea that Christians are to be successful. They are to have no problems and not be sick. This is in direct contradiction to the scripture. Christ said that in this world we will have tribulation. In this passage that James is breaking down the barriers between men. Christianity does this. Note the following passages.

*Colossians 3:11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond, nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.*

*1 Timothy 5:21 I charge thee before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.*

*2 Corinthians 4:5 For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord: and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.*

**1** My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

A hard concept for us to understand is that God's love is not object oriented as ours is. If you exist, you get the love of God. We love those things that are pleasing to us, and do not love those things that are displeasing to us. This even extends to people. With God this is not the case. There is a part of us that would like to think that God loves us because we are lovable. In fact, we are not. No man deserves the love of God any more than another man. It is God's nature to love, and it is his nature to not respect persons.

**2** For if there come into your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;

**3** And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:

**4** Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

James paints a picture of a rich man and a poor man coming into a church service. The words literally mean, "a gold-fingered man." The initial response of those attending were one of favour to the rich, but of distaste to the poor. We must fully realize that God sees the heart. If we even entertain these thoughts in our heart, God sees and judges them the same as if we did them. There is NO room in the church for respect of persons with any regard to externals. We are all equal sinners before God, equally deserving of his judgment, and equal partakers in his salvation. This is the one thing that sets true Christianity apart from all other religions in the world, no class distinctions.

### **The World's Class Distinctions**

**1. Wealth**

2. **Occupation**
3. **Talent**
4. **Intelligence**
5. **External Looks**
6. **Personality**
7. **Social Status**

**5** Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

**6** But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you and draw you before the judgment seats?

**7** Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

The case is made against the rich. James' point is that it is the rich that oppress the poor, therefore why cater to the oppressors? Note the following two verses:

*Jeremiah 9:23-24 Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.*

*1 Corinthians 1:26-29 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

The point being made is that God's class distinctions are far different than mans. Men look at strength, wealth, and power, God looks at the heart and character. What may be despised in our sight is of infinite worth in God's sight.

**8** If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well:

**9** But if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

James intensifies his thoughts on respect of persons by showing that to have respect of persons you are actually breaking the law of God. Remember that the Jews boiled the ten commandments down to two fundamental concepts, 1) Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, and mind and 2) love thy neighbor as thyself. To have respect of persons violates the second.

**10** For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all

**11** For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

The empty professor approaches the law of God with the intent of keeping it. They feel that as long as they do their best, that is OK. Unfortunately, James indicates that noone can keep the whole law.

The futility of keeping the law became apparent to some Pharisees who said that if a man just chose one law, and kept it faithfully, he was righteous. James blows that idea away. The law was given to show man that they cannot approach God on their own. They need the righteousness of God. In fact, when Christ came, he removed the observance of the law from externals, and made it internal. You were not only a murderer if you killed someone, you were also a murderer if you hated your brother. The law was given to reflect the absolute holiness of God and our utter inability to keep it. Only when we see that, can we ever hope to have salvation. The law brings a curse.

#### **The Curse of the Law**

- 1. The law demands that we do things contrary to our nature.**
- 2. The law demands that we do impossible things that we cannot do.**
- 3. The law requires perfect performance.**
- 4. The law refuses to accept good intentions or effort.**
- 5. The law has no payback plan to erase past sins.**
- 6. The law is an unrelenting taskmaster. It never allows one to take a “day off.”**
- 7. The law shatters happiness.**
- 8. The law always requires the ultimate penalty, hell with no parole.**
- 9. The law only demands, it never helps.**
- 10. The law has no plan of salvation.**
- 11. The law isn't interested in one's repentance.**
- 12. The law offers no forgiveness.**
- 13. The law offers no hope.**
- 14. The law stirs up sin.**
- 15. The law curses because it reveals one's sin.**

**12** So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.

The “law of liberty” is the principle of God's grace and our response to it. We were freed from the law of sin which was the old covenant. All the Mosaic law did was to show us our sin. But with the new law, that of liberty, we are totally freed from the old law of sin, and are free to worship and serve God with our spirit according to his grace, not judgment. We have been freed from sin to become the servants of righteousness.

**13** For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

The reason we are to live according to the law of liberty is that to live according to the law of Moses would result in us double-condemning ourselves. The standard whereby we wish to judge others will be the same standard used by God to judge us.

When we show partiality, we break the whole law. When we break the whole law, we fall under its condemnation. The law cannot save, nor can it do anything to help us please God. Because of this, we should respond to God's grace, particularly in our dealings with others. Only then will we receive the mercy that we should show to others.

#### **Test 5 - Righteous Works**

**14** What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

We now come to probably the most difficult passage in James, and the one that has resulted in more discussion and debate through the centuries than any other passage in the

New Testament. In fact, it is this passage that caused Martin Luther to call James a “right strawy epistle.”

The problem is that upon a surface reading of this passage one might be led to think that James is promoting the idea of justification by works. If so, this would fly in the face of everything Paul is saying in his epistles, and fly in the face of the very foundation of the gospel. In fact, some have used this passage to prove that there were two competing theologies in the early church, one that taught justification by works, and another justification by faith. The latter one won out, and as a result Christianity was changed forever.

However, this interpretation is superficial. James is not teaching justification by works, but teaching that justification produces works. His emphasis is on the external working out of one's justification, not the internal faith that produces justification in the first place. In fact, verse fourteen is talking about a kind of faith that produces no works. That faith cannot save! Works do not produce faith, but true faith produces works. The message of Hebrews 11 is one of faith producing works, not works producing faith. The very reason those in the Faiths Hall of Fame did the things they did was that they had faith. Their belief in God caused them to live a life of good works, their good works did not merit them salvation from God.

**15** If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food

**16** And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

James illustrates this point with a very concrete example. If someone lacks the necessities of life, such as food and clothing, we are to show mercy. A person who claims faith but yet exhibits no compassion on those who have a legitimate need proves that their claim of faith is a false claim. True faith produces compassion on those who have need and causes the one claiming faith to act.

**17** Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

This is the axiomatic truth that James is trying to illustrate boiled down to one sentence. Faith, without works, is dead faith. It is not possible for a person to have true, saving faith and exhibit absolutely no change in behavior. Faith always produces action. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “If any man be in Christ he is a new creation...” One who is a new creation does not exhibit the unchanged characteristics of their previous life. They may sin, but when they do they are convicted of that sin and repent. Those who do not repent and do not exhibit a changed life are very possible deceiving themselves.

**18** Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

James' point is simple. Anyone can claim to have faith, but one's claim to faith is invisible unless accompanied by works. Only those who exhibit works have the right to claim that they have faith.

**19** Thou believest there is one God, thou doest well: the devils also believe and tremble.

**20** But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

James here describes a non-saving faith. The devils believe God. They are very orthodox in their theology, believing everything that pertains to the gospel. The problem is that their

belief is a dead belief, as it produces no works and no repentance. It is possible for a person to believe all the facts about Christ and the gospel, and yet not be a true believer. Only when faith is accompanied by action is that faith real.

**What is Saving Faith?**  
(taken from study notes *Justified By Faith* by John MacArthur)

**What Saving Faith is NOT**

1. **Saving Faith IS NOT Visible Morality - Matthew 23:27;19:16-22**
2. **Saving Faith IS NOT Intellectual Knowledge - Romans 1:21; 2:17-20**
3. **Saving Faith IS NOT Religious Involvement - Matthew 25:1-12**
4. **Saving Faith IS NOT Active Ministry - Matthew 7:22-23**
5. **Saving Faith IS NOT Conviction of Sin - Acts 24:25; John 16:8; John 8:37,40; Revelations 16:9,11,21**
6. **Saving Faith IS NOT Assurance**
7. **Saving Faith IS NOT a Time of Decision**

**What Saving Faith IS**

1. **Saving Faith IS a Love for God - Psalms 42:1-3**
2. **Saving Faith IS Repentance From Sin - Proverbs 28:13; Psalms 51:1-4; 1 John 1:8-10**
3. **Saving Faith IS Genuine Humility - Matthew 5:3-4,6-7; Luke 15:11-32**
4. **Saving Faith IS Devotion to God's Glory - Phillipians 1:20**
5. **Saving Faith IS Continual Prayer - Galatians 4:6**
6. **Saving Faith IS Selfless Love - 1 John 2:9-10; 3:14; 4:7-8**
7. **Saving Faith IS Separation From the World - 1 John 5:4-5; 2:15; 4:4; 1 Corinthians 2:12**
8. **Saving Faith IS Spiritual Growth - Matthew 13:8; 1 John 2:12-13; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 1:6**
9. **Saving Faith IS Obedient Living - 1 John 2:3-51; Ephesians 2:10**

**21** Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

**22** Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

**23** And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness; and he was called the Friend of God.

**24** Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

James illustrates his teaching on faith by drawing on two examples, Abraham and Rahab. The first example, Abraham, shows that Abrahams justification was evidenced by his actions regarding Isaac. Notice the following table. We find that Abraham was declared justified nearly twenty-five years prior to offering Isaac on the altar. When we look at Romans 4 we are told that Abraham was justified by faith, and here we are told that Abraham was justified by works. Why the difference?

Abraham's Age	Passage	Event
75	Genesis 12	Called by God from Haran
86	Genesis 15:6	Abraham is justified
99	Genesis 17	Abraham Circumcised
100	Genesis 21	Isaac is born
112?	Genesis 22	Isaac is offered

The difference is simple. Paul looks at Abraham's justification from the viewpoint of God. As far as God was concerned, Abraham was justified the moment he believed God's promise as given in Genesis 15:1-5. However, the world did not see Abraham's justification until he offered Isaac on the altar over twenty-five years later. James looks at Abraham's justification from the viewpoint of his works. Abraham's justification in Genesis 15:6 was evidenced to the entire world by his offering of Isaac in Genesis 22. Without the external act of offering Isaac, Abraham's faith would have remained invisible to the world.

**25** Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?

**26** For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

James second account, that of Rahab, is found in Joshua 2:9-24. There we read that Rahab hid the spies who were sent by Joshua to spy out the land of Canaan. Why did Rahab hide the spies, it was because she had heard what God had done to the Egyptians, and as a result believed that God had given Israel the land. Her faith translated itself into works, and as a result she was saved and became a member of the Messianic line.

The message of the New Testament is clear. Faith always produces works. Without works, one has an invisible, and most likely, a dead faith.