

EXEGESIS OF JAMES 2:14

The purpose of this paper is to consider the primary positions on the proper interpretation of James 2:14: “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?” One view is that James is teaching that salvation from the death penalty of sin is by faith mixed with works. Most evangelicals are in agreement in rejecting this view, which will not be considered here. The majority evangelical view is that James is teaching that the type or quality of faith that saves from the death penalty of sin will necessarily produce good works. Stated in a negative, if good works are not present in the life of a professing believer, then their profession was false and their faith was not genuine saving faith. A minority evangelical view is that James is expressing that at the judgment seat of Christ, it is faith with works, and not faith by itself, that will result in deliverance, i.e., rewards. I will argue that the former view is incorrect and that the latter view is consistent with both the context of the letter and the flow of James’ argument.

Most evangelicals take James to be differentiating between two kinds of faith, often referred to as saving faith and spurious faith. These terms, of course, never occur in Scripture, but R.C. Sproul nevertheless explains under the caption “saving faith”:

James is asking what kind of faith is saving faith. He makes it clear that no one is justified by a mere profession of faith. Anyone can say he has faith. But saying it and having it are not the same thing. True faith always manifests itself in works. If no works follow from faith, then the alleged faith is “dead” and useless...

* * *

At issue here is the question of genuine faith. The Reformers taught that “justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.” True faith is never alone....¹

Similarly, in a section of his commentary on James captioned “empty confession,”

John MacArthur explains:

The question **Can that faith save him?** is not offered to dispute the importance of faith, but to oppose the idea that just any kind of faith can save (cf. Matt. 7:16-18). The grammatical form of the question calls for a negative answer—“No, it cannot save.” A profession of **faith** that is devoid of righteous **works** cannot **save** a person, no matter how strongly it may be proclaimed. As already noted, it is not that some amount of good **works** added to true **faith** can **save** a person, but rather that **faith** that is genuine and saving will inevitably *produce* good **works**.²

With this summary of the prevailing view in mind, it is helpful to take a step back and consider the audience, structure, and purpose most commentators see in the epistle. Arnold Fruchtenbaum argues that James’ audience is Jewish Christians outside of Israel:

He states that he is writing to *the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion*. The term *Dispersion*, which in the Greek text is found with the definite article, was a technical Jewish term then, as it is to this day, referring to Jews living outside the Land. Therefore, he is writing to Jews living outside the Land, not to Jews in general. The technical term, *Dispersion*, is found only two other times in the New Testament: John 7:35 and 1 Peter 1:1. As the head of the Church of Jerusalem, as the *servant* of both the Father and the Son, Jacob/James is exercising

¹ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1997), 69-70.

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James* (Chicago: Moody Press 1998), 124.

his headship and authority over Jewish believers outside the land...
The epistle, then, was written to Jewish believers...³

Most commentators are in general agreement that the audience being addressed by James is Jewish believers.⁴ Others question whether the audience is Jewish or Gentile, but importantly, confirm that the audience is Christian.⁵

Structurally, commentators tend to see the book as reflective of the Proverbs, with several sections addressing discreet topics, but without a pronounced, overarching theme or purpose. James Richardson explains his view of the overall structure or lack thereof:

One of the major debates over how to interpret James concerns the letter's structure. Some have asserted that James is a rather disconnected collection of sayings, while others have contended that it is a well-organized and coherent letter centering on a theme or set of themes. A number of proposals based on overly complex structural or syntactical analyses are not persuasive because they presume a kind of textual control foreign to the characteristics of writing in the ancient world. Structure according to topical arrangement is certain apparent in some segments: 1:2-12 presents the testing of faith; 2:1-11 presents the contradictions of faith and favoritism; 2:14-26 presents the relation between faith and deeds; 3:1-12 presents the power of speech; 3:13-18 presents the two kinds of wisdom; 4:1-10 presents the opposition to friendship with the world and friendship with God; 5:7-11 presents the virtue of patience; 5:13-18 presents the power of effective prayer. Other verses and clusters of verses in the letter are not so easy to classify. Nearly all form a bridge of thought between the units just listed, but it is not always clear whether their content is linked more closely to a previous or a following section or

³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: Hebrews, James, I & II Peter, Jude* (Tustin: Ariel Ministries 2005), 211-212.

⁴ MacArthur, 13; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2000), 23-25; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible: 1 Corinthians through Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1983), 627.

⁵ Kurt A. Richardson, *The New American Commentary: James* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers 1997), 39.

whether they have a semi-independent role to play in the transition of the text... Although the structure of the letter is approximated by the outline offered in this commentary, one might still inquire about organizing idea of the letter.... the structure of the letter is not readily apparent....⁶

In similar fashion, other commentators organize the book into groups of verses addressing discreet topics. J. Vernon McGee, for instance, organizes it into three chunks: (1) chapters 1 through 3 address various tests of faith; (2) chapter 4 addresses worldliness; and (3) chapter 5 addresses practical eschatology.⁷ John MacArthur sees the text in thirteen separate “test” of faith sections, similar to McGee’s view of the first three chapters.⁸ Arnold Fruchtenbaum also sees the book as primarily about the testing of faith, although organized in eight sections as indicated by the use of the term *brethren*.⁹ Douglas Moo sees five general sections, but argues more forcefully for a unifying theme, namely that of believers not compromising to worldly values.¹⁰ In one way or the other, all of these commentators see the book as having a focus on differentiating real from spurious faith.

While the conclusion that the epistle is addressed to believers should have a tremendous impact on the interpretation of the book, I have found that commentators tend to acknowledge it but, in practical terms, ignore it in their

⁶ Kurt A. Richardson, 25-26.

⁷ J. Vernon McGee, 626.

⁸ John MacArthur, 5.

⁹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, 215-216.

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, 44-46.

exegesis. I will return to the significance of the audience later. What is obvious is that how one views the structure (or lack of structure) and purpose of the book is key to the exegesis. Once it is determined, for example, that James is fundamentally concerned about various tests for the quality of faith (i.e., saving vs. spurious), that theological commitment shades the reading of the whole book. At least three issues seem to underlay the determination that James is dealing with quality of faith issues.

First, there is a pre-occupation with dealing with the text in a way that harmonizes it with Paul's writing, and often an assumption that James is addressing a perversion of Paul's teachings. Douglas Moo, for example, writes:

Many commentators follow the tack taken by Luther and insist that James directly sets himself in opposition to the view of justification taught by Paul and current in the Pauline churches. Some even think the "foolish man" of v. 20 is Paul himself! ... the scenario that makes the best sense is to think that he is writing to oppose a misunderstood form of Paul's teaching. The readers of the letter, scattered by persecution into areas near Antioch, have become acquainted with a perverted form of the Pauline viewpoint, with the slogan "faith alone justifies" as its hallmark. James writes, then, to counter this false view of the relationship between faith, works, and salvation. James and Paul, when properly interpreted in their own contexts, are not opposed to one another on this point. They give the appearance of a conflict because they are writing from very different vantage points in order to combat very different problems.¹¹

Kurt Richardson's comments concerning the potential conflict between James and Paul are similar:

James's famous text that has seemed to so many to contradict Paul appears here. What we find, however, is not a collision with Paul at all. Any allusion to his teaching only stands against the very misreadings of the gospel that Paul stood against, for example, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (Rom 6:1). The

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, 121.

dissimilarities between the issues that concerned James and those that concerned Paul are much greater than the similarities. The way in which James used special terms, such as “works,” is quite different from Paul’s usage. James’s unique questions about the usefulness of inactive faith and the vitality of such faith were particularly his own.

Finally, James was expounding upon the nature of faith, not on the question of salvation in the end. James was emphatic about the reality of judgment, but here he was restricting his declarations to the reality of faith. Who can and who cannot justifiably claim to have faith? The justification of the claim to have faith or the unjustification of that claim is what is in question. Only genuine faith can stand up under trial and thereby be “perfected” as it was in the case of Abraham and Rahab...¹²

The view that James is giving a corrective to a popular misunderstanding of Paul on soteriology forces one to argue within the framework of faith necessary to save from hell. This framework for James’ writing, however, is highly speculative. The most obvious omission from James’ epistle is a reference to Paul! Surely if his primary concern was correcting a perversion of Paul’s teaching, he would have simply stated that to be the case rather than creating an ambiguous epistle. More fundamentally, why would James write believers—people with presumably genuine faith—to warn them about this perversion? Assuming the legitimacy of the genuine/spurious faith distinction, James’ audience already has and comprehends genuine faith.

The second issue that underlay the determination that James is addressing genuine versus spurious faith is the unwillingness to see the word “save” in any other sense than as saving from the death penalty of sin. Indeed, this is really the heart of the matter, and is what undergirds the necessity most commentators feel of trying to defend James against Paul and vice versa. There is no recognition that the

¹² Kurt A. Richardson, 127-128.

term often (and arguably most often) is not used in reference to saving from hell, and in fact, that Jesus used the term that way. And while any reliance by James on Paul's teachings is highly questionable because of the consensus among most conservatives of an early date for the writing of the epistle, that James relied on Jesus' teaching is beyond question. Jesus said to his disciples, for example, in the context of talking about discipleship:

25 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. 26 For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

(Matthew 16:25-27). The Greek term for "life" in verse 25 is the same as the term translated "soul" in verse 26, and verse 27 confirms that the context is future rewards to disciples from Jesus. The term "save" in verse 25 is not an act of God in relation to hell, but of the disciple in this lifetime. What is at stake is the life one can have as a committed disciple versus the life the world has to offer. The implicit idea of saving one's soul or life in this context is tied to rewards, not hell. Rather or not James had in mind this saying of Jesus does not matter. The point is simply that, in order to properly exegete the text in James, the possibility that he uses the term "save" in a way other than to mean save from hell must be considered in light of the audience, context, and flow of the argument. This is rarely done.

Thus, most commentators acknowledge that a Christian audience is in view but do not rely on that in their exegesis. Most commentators see no common purpose undergirding the entire epistle, or if they do, they take their view of James 2:14 and stretch it throughout the letter. Most problematic, however, they presume

that James is using “save” to mean save from hell, and in view of the tension this creates with Paul’s writings, they desperately try to derive a viewpoint that does not put Paul and James in direct conflict. Douglas Moo, for instance, takes the view that “[w]hat James is contesting, then, is that the particular faith he has just mentioned can save. This faith is what a ‘man’ who does not have works *claims* to have. James’s main point is that this “faith” is, in biblical terms, no faith at all.”¹³ Moo quickly rejects the notion that “save” might have another meaning:

The opposite error is made by those who, with the best intentions, want to guard against precisely the kind of theological error we have just been discussing. They avoid the potential difficulty by insisting that the word “save” does not refer here to eschatological deliverance, but to some kind of rescue from earthly danger or trial. They note that “save” ... apparently has this meaning in 5:14. But the word does not seem to have this meaning elsewhere in James (1:21; 4:12; 5:20). Especially important is the occurrence in 1:21, since the present discussion is part of the argument begun in that verse; and 1:21 speaks definitively about the “salvation of souls.”¹⁴

While Moo rejects that the saving can be related to earthly peril, he does not address the possibility that it is saving at the judgment seat of Christ.

The third thing that undergirds the majority view is an assumption that “dead faith” means a false profession of faith. To begin with, I would point out that when these commentators write about false professions, they are ambiguous as to what they mean by that phrase. Is it a false profession when someone says “I believe” but they really do not believe at all? Or is it a false profession when they really and truly believe but do not back it up with however much works these

¹³ Douglas J. Moo, 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

commentators require to be added to the cross to get into heaven? There is no disagreement that the former is a false profession, just as the phrase implies, because someone is saying they believe but they do not believe. But the latter is a truthful profession. What the majority view is saying by its use of the misleading phrase “false profession” is that truthfully believing in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and trusting in him and him alone for salvation from hell is a false profession if it is not accompanied by works. It would be helpful in this analysis if they called this an *inadequate profession* or an *insufficient profession* since whatever content must be believed has been believed and truthfully professed. Perhaps they would say that it is the commitment to a life of fruitfulness that has been falsely professed. However they utilize this ambiguous phrase, the heart of the problem is that we cannot simply assume what “dead faith” means, or simply ascribe to it a meaning that best fits our theological commitment.

Moo, Richardson, McGee, Fruchtenbaum, Sproul and others inevitably arrive at their conclusions about this text because of where they start. But it seems rather obvious that it makes no sense to talk about dead faith that was never alive to begin with:

For example, let us take the word “dead” in v. 17. Do we use the word “dead” of things that are fake, false, or spurious? If I were to take you to the wax museum of the Presidents at Disney World, acted as your guide, and upon entering the museum looked at you and said, “OK, gang, look at the dead Presidents.” Would that statement make any sense to you? It shouldn’t. Why? Simply because these Presidents were never alive. We don’t use the word “dead” of things that were never alive. We use it of things which were alive, but now are dead.¹⁵

¹⁵ David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology* (Longwood: Xulon Press 2010), 23-24.

Zane Hodges is correct in his commentary to stress the importance of a careful analysis of this term rather than dealing with it “very simplistically.” He argues that James uses the word “dead” because it is the saving or not saving of a life that is in issue.¹⁶ While I disagree with Hodge’s conclusion that James 2:14 has only temporal delivery in view, he is correct that it is wrong to assume the phrase “dead faith” can have only one meaning, and moreover, I agree with his conclusion that dead faith means “sterile, ineffectual, or unproductive.”¹⁷

In my view, there are several problems with the majority approach that weigh in favor of the minority view, namely that James is not dealing with the genuine versus spurious faith distinction at all, but instead is addressing the life of faith that will be rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ. The most glaring problem with the majority approach is that, while they acknowledge an audience of believers (typically Jewish believers), they then take most of the book to be about those who are not believers at all. It seems incomprehensible that if James is questioning their salvation he would refer to them 15 times as either “brethren” or “beloved brethren” in just five chapters. (See 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). But even more incomprehensible, why is there not an explicit statement of this concern and a clear explication of the gospel and the necessary “saving faith”? The majority view has James differentiating saving from spurious faith in the most convoluted and complex way rather than just speaking plainly and concisely. Could

¹⁶ Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Denton: Grace Evangelical Society 2009), 62-63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

James have just said, “If you don’t have a life of fruitfulness, you made a false profession and are going to hell. Here is what you need to believe.... Here is what you need to do.”?

Fundamental to the problem is a failure to see the epistle as an organized work. While the view that it is simply proverbial may be out of favor in modern scholarship, the view taken by most commentators still fails to reflect a cohesive organization to the book. Zane Hodges is correct to see this epistle as carefully organized, with the theme presented in 1:19-20¹⁸: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” Broadly speaking, the admonitions (1) be swift to hear, (2) be slow to speak, and (3) be slow to wrath, give the book a cohesive unity. This is critical because, when combined with the fact that the audience is Christian, then however we read James 2:14 and following, we must understand it in unity with the rest of the book. James’ multiple references to his audience as brethren, for example, weighs against James 2:14 dealing with false brethren if the book has this unity. Moreover, James 2:14 cannot be divorced from the beginning of chapter 1 where James indisputably is dealing with believers growing in their faith through trials. Absent this unity, commentators are instead writing their theology of James 2:14 back onto chapter one and concluding that the trials there are to test whether there has been a false profession, a conclusion that is foreign to anything in the text.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

A third problem has already been addressed in part, namely the assumption that “save” can only mean from hell. The majority view typically references James 1:21 to support their view: “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” Because James says “save your souls” he must mean salvation from hell. But this ignores Jesus’ own use of the concept of saving one’s soul/life in a purely discipleship context and the indisputable fact that the term translated soul here is routinely translated as “life.” We must look to the context to determine whether James is talking about discipleship or not. James’ statement in 1:21 is in the immediate context of 1:19: “Wherefore, ***my beloved brethren***, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” It is brethren/Christians whose souls are being saved. We know they are saved from hell because they trusted Christ, but James make this saving contingent on laying aside sin and receiving with meekness the engrafted word, which together with the verses that follow is plainly about doing the word. Since James is talking to believers about obedience, is it not obvious that he is talking about discipleship, not salvation from hell?

A fourth problem, related to the third one, is the seeming lack of recognition of the bema judgment for Christians and exactly what that entails. (See 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Though Paul speaks there, as Jesus does in Matthew 16 and several parables, of dealing with people based on works, Paul could not be more clear that the person with no commendable works is saved, though as by fire. The majority view seems to treat the judgment as a determination of whether the professing believer had true faith or not, so that James’ audience is

really looking forward to a judgment to determine their eternal destiny, not their eternal reward. They hold up Abraham and Rahab as the standards. This is what true faith looks like! But what about Samson (cf. Hebrews 11:32), for instance? What about his life demonstrated true faith as opposed to a false profession? What about righteous Lot? What about the hypothetical man in 1 Corinthians 3 for whom his entire life burned up but he was “saved”? Moreover, Genesis 15:6 confirms that Abraham’s profession was real.

A fifth problem is evident in James’ use of Abraham as an example. While Genesis 15:6 confirms that Abraham truly believed, James focuses on events decades later in his life. The spurious/saving faith view cannot be divorced from the question of assurance of salvation. Does this mean that it may take decades before we can look our lives and know our profession was real? Apparently the replete promises in the Bible that one has everlasting life upon believing (see Romans 1:16; John 3:36) are no assurance at all. Assuming a person lives long enough, he may gain assurance through works. This excludes those who die shortly (or perhaps even several years) after their profession from having assurance, such as the thief on the cross. Moreover, this view encourages self-doubts about salvation, and ultimately, it manipulates people to be scrutinizing themselves and other believers to see from their works if their faith is real. I think this is nothing more than rank legalism that flows from our sin nature rather than a genuine concern for false professions. It removes any real possibility of assurance, which is foreign to James’s and other New Testament writers’ confirmation of their audience as believers.

Returning to the text at hand, we must interpret it in both the context of the overall epistle, organized around 1:19-20, written to believers, and in the more immediate context of the judgment in James 2:12-13. The only eschatological judgment of Christians in Scripture is the bema. This view perfectly harmonizes James' writing with Paul's, rather than leaving us with an obvious contradiction between their writings that we will label a "tension" to avoid inerrancy problems. Seeing the book as a cohesive unity, 2:14 is in the immediate context of the bema. The saving in view is the saving of a believer's life at the bema. Jesus said that the believer who loses what this world has to offer in favor of a life of obedience would save that life. This is the living faith James is talking about. It produces a life delivered at the bema, that is, a life richly rewarded. The life—that is, the works and accomplishments during one's tenure on earth—are not burned up or lost at the judgment, but delivered into eternity. Obviously, just like the hypothetical man in 1 Corinthians 3, the believer that does not have good works will find at the bema judgment that faith is not enough. He will be saved, though as by fire, but all that he accomplished in his life is lost there. His faith alone is useless, for that life was its own reward and is forever lost.

The majority view attempts to harmonize Paul and James, but in failing to see the overall structure of the book, failing to adequately take into consideration that the audience is Christian, and making simplistic assumptions about key concepts like "dead faith" and "save" and "souls," the majority view creates more problems than it solves. It eliminates any hope of assurance of salvation and engenders rank legalism. Moreover, it ultimately does not really harmonize Paul with James. And

more importantly, these writers make no attempt to harmonize, on their view, James with Jesus. Throughout John's Gospel, there is just believing resulting in eternal life. Jesus never hangs their salvation on a life of fruitfulness, although he obviously encourages good works. How easy it would have been on this critical question for God to have provided a single explicit verse. The minority view harmonizes James with both Paul and Jesus by recognizing the reality of the bema and that the notion of being saving, or having one's soul/life saved is consistent with other scriptural teaching on the bema. This view harmonizes the book as a cohesive whole. This view also preserves assurance of salvation based solely on the promises of the word of God. For all of these reasons, I believe James is dealing in James 2:14 and following with the sort of Christian life that is profitable at the bema.