

James Part Two: Deep Dive

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The book of James is such an intriguing, challenging and confronting book that has been able to endure high levels of scrutiny and remain a part of what we would now consider the New Testament canon. The book of James faced a large degree of resistance, even by major theologians such as Irenaeus and Luther, due to contentious areas such as authorship, date, but most importantly the theology contained within the book of James.

It has been typically claimed that the book of James does not contain any theology due to its lack of explicit theological teaching or referencing on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Rather it can be considered theological in the way that the author presents a kind of teaching, or sermon, on the reality of a theological commitment in practice. The book of James contains theological insight into areas of trials and temptations, wisdom, the power of words, and lastly the balance of faith and deeds. This balance of faith and deeds, particularly found in the passage of James 2:14-26, is the topic that this Deep Dive will be concerned with.

The teaching found in James on the topic of faith and deeds is often viewed as an outright conflict to the teachings of Paul and Christ himself, but we hope to expound on the scriptures and develop an understanding that such paradoxical teachings complement each other and are essential to be held in balance for a healthy Christian faith. The apparent disagreement of the teachings of Paul and of James can be summarized in the following scriptures;

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from work in the law.” Romans 3:28 (ESV)

“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” James 2:24 (ESV)

After a quick read through of those scriptures, even when including the surrounding passages, it would appear that they are quite polar opposite right?

The point of confusion arises when we take into consideration what Paul states in 2 Timothy 3:16; “all scripture is God-breathed”. Thus if we believe that the Holy Spirit divinely inspired both Paul and James so that their writings are ‘God-breathed’, and also assert that God is whole and unable to be divided, then we must also assert that by nature these scriptures are literally unable to disagree with each other. So this leaves us with one of two

solutions. Firstly we could declare that the author James was not in fact divinely inspired and the book of James should have no place in the canon of scripture. Or secondly, we could arrive at the conclusion that these scriptures are not antithetical but are rather reconciled within the whole realm of scripture. This latter conclusion is what we will continue to explore.

To start an exploration of the complementary nature of these scriptures we must first explore the individual cultural context and purpose of the books of James and Romans.

Paul's purpose in his epistle to the Romans is to counteract a Jewish tendency to rely on the obedience of the law for an entryway into salvation, along with religious and cultural discrimination. Paul does so through an emphasis that it is by faith alone, through grace, that an individual is justified (see Romans 3:28). Similarly, James is attempting to counteract an attitude that has distorted faith into a mere doctrinal orthodoxy or belief. And does so by emphasizing the need for works (see James 2:24). This conclusion is further solidified when we consider that the book of James was written between 5 and 10 years post-Paul's letter to the Romans. So we can understand that Paul's revolutionary teaching on the justification by faith was developing a Christian body of believers that leant towards an emphasis on belief over action. James was the perfect person to speak to this. Firstly, as the leader of the church at Jerusalem, James would certainly have seen this influence first hand and would have the authority to appropriately attempt to balance Paul's teaching. Further, just as Katie covered in the Dive last week, James, due to his relation to Jesus, had to personally overcome the obstacle of familiarity and he encourages his readers to do the same. To move past a familiarity with our faith and into an unfamiliarity and uncomfotability that true faith calls us to step out into.

These passages found in both Romans and James utilize the same Greek word 'ergon' – which means works, deeds, or labour, but just as we have seen that their contexts are vastly different we cannot apply the same interpretation onto both passages but rather must also consider their individual applications accordingly.

This is where we come to the conclusion that James and Paul are actually speaking of a different kind of works. Paul is speaking of a work towards salvation, and how this in itself will never produce salvation. But James speaks of works that come out of salvation, a kind of works that act as an external evidence of an internal faith. It is a difference that is distinguished by the fruitlessness of pre-conversion work and the necessity of post-conversion works.

For these reasons we can understand that the teaching of Paul and James are actually reconciled. Just as it is not faith or deeds, but faith and deeds, they are two halves to a whole. The power of scripture comes not when it is isolated or removed but when it is considered in its totality. When we look at the big picture through the lens of reconciliation we are left with the statement that we have been saved by grace for good works. Or as

Spurgeon describes in his sermon “it is a faith which produces works which save us; the works do not save us, but a faith which does not produce works is a faith that will only deceive, and cannot lead us into heaven”.

Christ was this perfect example of the balance of faith and works. He did not undergo the work of dying on the cross to save himself, but rather to save others. We are also, to some extent, called to do the same – do works for the sake of saving others.