

What About James 2?

Please note, this passage is very difficult and there are multiple defensible interpretations. The following is my interpretation (Blake Jennings') of this passage. This interpretation is shared by many but not all of the pastors and elders of our church.

Question: Doesn't James 2:14-26 teach that good works are required for our salvation?

Answer:

James 2:14-26 is commonly used as “proof” that good works are in some sense required for salvation from eternal condemnation. Good works are thus interpreted as either part of how we earn salvation (Roman Catholic view), how we keep hold of salvation (Arminian view), or how we prove that we are indeed saved (many Calvinists). Yet I believe James has something else in mind in this passage, as demonstrated in the following interpretive points:

- First, we need to identify James' audience. Here are some important clues:
 - (1:1) To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad
 - (1:2) my brethren (appears 12 times)
 - (1:16) my beloved brethren (appears 3 times)
 - (1:3) the testing of **your faith** produces endurance
 - (2:1) **your faith** in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ
 - (4:4) you adulteresses – adultery presupposes union with Christ
 - (4:5) already indwelt by the Spirit

What can we conclude? James is writing to Jewish **believers**, those who have already accepted the gospel and are thus already filled with the Holy Spirit. However, these believers are not living as they should. So James writes this epistle primarily to convict and exhort his audience to endure suffering well (chs 1,5), to speak in a godly manner (ch 3), to perform needed good works (ch 1,2,3), to put an end to favoritism and jealousy (ch2,3,4), and to break off their adulterous relationship with the world (ch 4,5).

- Second, we need to study the context immediately surrounding 2:14-26.
 - **2:12-13** speaks about a coming certain judgment of James' audience based on the “law of liberty.” What is this law? It is the collection of Christ's commands to His followers (1:25; 2:8). What is this judgment? We see here that it is based on the mercy we show to others, and we'll get another important clue in the context following our passage.
 - **3:1** speaks about a coming judgment of the “brethren” which will be stricter for those who are teachers in the church. So this judgment is based on works such as fulfilling Christ's commands [2:12], showing mercy to others [2:13], and proving faithful in one's ministry [3:1], and it is stricter for those doing ministry in the church. Certainly this judgment cannot be about entering heaven or perishing in hell, or (1) James has contradicted all that the New Testament says about receiving eternal life by grace through faith alone [whole book of John, Rom 4, Eph 2:8-10, Titus, etc], and (2) all of us in ministry should quit immediately so as to increase our chances of obtaining heaven!! No, this is clearly a reference to the judgment of believers by Jesus Christ for rewards. Paul also speaks of this future, works-based judgment of all believers where some will prove worthy of honor and reward while others will experience shame and

loss even though they will still be welcomed eternally into heaven (Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:9-10; 2 Tim 2:12).

In conclusion, the context immediately preceding and immediately following our passage speaks clearly about a certain coming day of judgment for all believers where we will stand before Jesus Christ as He evaluates our faithfulness in this life.

- Third, with this surrounding context in mind, we can finally define two key terms in our passage, “save” (v14) and “justify” (v24).
 - The verb “save” (σωζω) in the Bible simply means “to rescue, deliver,” forcing us to rely on context to determine who is being rescued from what. In other words, please remember that when you encounter the verb “save” (or the noun “salvation”) in your Bible, it does NOT always mean “get into heaven when you die.” From vv12-13, we can confidently conclude that the verb in v14 refers to believers being saved from a merciless judgment when they stand before Christ for reward or loss based on their deeds.
 - The verb “justify” (δικαιω) means “to declare righteous,” where details of this declaration must again be supplied from context. The challenge for us arises when we compare verse 24 to Paul’s statement in Rom 3:28, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Are Paul and James at odds with one another? They are not at odds if we properly define what each of them mean by “justify.” In Romans 3, Paul means that humans are declared righteous by God in His own sight by faith alone. This declaration is based upon the propitiation of Christ (3:25-26) and occurred for Abraham in Genesis 15 (quoted by Paul in Rom 4:3). This justification in the sight of God results in eternal peace with God (Rom 5:1). But James has something different in mind, as evidenced by the fact that he focuses on Abraham’s good deeds in Genesis 22 (obeying God’s command to offer his son as a sacrifice) rather than on his faith in Genesis 15. James says that by his good deeds, Abraham’s faith was perfected and his justification by God in Genesis 15 (quoted in James 2:23) was “fulfilled.” What does James mean by that? Was Abraham only conditionally righteous in God’s sight, such that future disobedience could make him unrighteous again? No, James helps us understand his point clearly in the last line of 2:23. The outcome of Abraham’s obedience in Genesis 22 was that forever afterwards he was called, “the friend of God.” Who is calling Abraham God’s friend? Humans. In fact, for 4000 years both Jews and Christians have looked to Abraham as a model of faithfulness because of his extreme obedience in Gen 22. So James’ point is that, though Abraham was justified in God’s sight through faith alone in Gen 15, it was not till he publicly obeyed God in Gen 22 that he was justified in the sight of mankind. This is the meaning of the verb in 2:24 – to be declared righteous by God in the sight of others. This “justification” can happen in this life as it did for Abraham or in the next life when we stand before Christ and He publicly rewards faithful believers and declares to them, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”
- Fourth, how do we interpret key phrases such as “faith, if it has no works, is dead” (vv17,26)? We should notice that James does not say, “faith without works is non-existent” or “an oxymoron.” No, he admits that the faith does exist, but it is “by itself” (v17). But what does it mean that one’s faith is “dead?” James tells us clearly in v20 – such faith is “useless.” Though such faith will save a person from hell, it is useless to a believer standing before the judgment seat of Christ, for it cannot save that believer from experiencing the

shame of Christ's rebuke (v14). Furthermore, such faith is useless to other people, for it does not care for the needy (vv15-16) nor does it model righteousness to them (vv21-24).

- Fifth, how do we interpret vv18-19? As I was told by a professor teaching James at Dallas Theological Seminary, these two verses present one of the hardest interpretive problems of the entire New Testament. Why? Because biblical Greek did not include any punctuation, meaning that we have no idea where the objector's argument ends. Different English translations put the parenthesis in different places because in the end, none of us know precisely what James had in mind. Given this incredible difficulty, we must refrain from making any strong conclusions from these verses. Please do not use the statement "the demons also believe, and shudder" to make a point because it is very likely that this was spoken by James' "foolish" opponent rather than by James. Furthermore, we know from Heb 2:16 that salvation was never offered to angelic beings, so the example of demons is pointless to the argument. For those who do want to wrestle with these verses, I've included a fairly technical analysis of the various views at the end of this paper (I warn you, it's a bit boring).
- Finally, we should consider the example of Rahab. Her story comes from Joshua 2 and tells us that she was a Gentile woman living in Jericho who believed in Israel's God. She then acted on this belief and took a huge risk to hide Israelite spies. The result of her good deed was that she and her family were spared when Jericho was destroyed and she became a model to future generations of faithfulness. So what is James' point? Before the events of Joshua 2, Rahab was justified in God's sight because of her faith and would have thus gone to heaven. Yet, like Abraham, it was not until her risky obedience that she was justified in the sight of other people. At this point, her faith became incredibly "useful" for it saved many lives and identified her as a paragon of obedience.

Conclusion: In 2:14-26, James is indeed teaching that good works are required for our salvation, but not salvation from hell. Instead, good works rescue believers from uselessness in this life and shame in the next life when they stand before Christ for judgment. When we follow our faith with good works, we are "justified" by God in the sight of other men and women and become, like Abraham and Rahab before us, models of faithfulness.

Excursus on James 2:18: Who is “someone” in v18?

There are three primary interpretive answers to the question of the identity of “someone” in James 2:18ⁱ. First, many commentators view the statement made by this “someone” as identical to the argument being developed by James, and therefore identify him as a hypothetical ally supporting James’ argument. In this view, James utilizes a literary device to drive his point home, creating an imaginary ally who speaks to the end of v18 to a false professor (the “foolish fellow” of v20) in the audience to whom James again addresses in vs 19 and followingⁱⁱ. While this view does eliminate some of the difficulties of the following views, it is untenable for two primary reasons. First, “someone” in v18 seems to point back to v14 where James introduces “someone” with whom he disagrees. Furthermore, the strong rebuke of v20 seems most naturally to refer to this “someone” and not an imaginary, silent false professor. Second, the use of the strong “but” (ἀλλά) demands that this “someone” must be in disagreement with James. Neither here nor in any other New Testament example of the diatribe style nor in secular literature is someone introduced with this formula as an allyⁱⁱⁱ. For these reasons the remaining interpretive views identify the “someone” as an opponent of James.

The second interpretive view states that this “someone” is an opponent casting doubt upon the reality of James’ faith^{iv}. This may be a non-Christian Jew speaking throughout v18 criticizing James’ faith and pointing to his own works of the law^v, or it may be an unknown objector simply stating, “Do you [James] really have faith?” However, either option hardly serves to contradict James’ point. Furthermore, the first option utilizes “work” (ἔργα) in a different way than James uses it everywhere else (it would here alone be signifying works of the Mosaic law)^{vi} while the second option begins James’ response to the objector with “and I” (καγὼ), a very unlikely word to begin an answer with^{vii}.

A third option poses the fewest interpretive problems. In this view, the “someone” is an opponent who objects to James’ argument that faith and works are interconnected. James is using a common literary device, creating a hypothetical objector to present a rebuttal he foresees being advanced among members of his audience. This view harmonizes with the context best and avoids the primary problems of the views above. Within this scheme, there are at least two primary ways to interpret the objector’s argument and James’ response. First, many commentators view the objector as speaking only through v18a, saying, “one has faith and one has works.” By this, the objector is arguing for toleration of those who have faith but no works. He

does so by separating faith and works into distinct ‘gifts’ or ‘focuses.’ He is saying in effect, “Some people have great faith, some great works, why must we be so narrow as to demand both from all Christians?” to which James responds beginning in v18b that faith and works are absolutely inseparable, and that faith without works is demonic faith. This view, however, encounters two primary exegetical difficulties. First, as in the second view above, James would be starting his rebuttal with *καγω*, an unlikely choice. Furthermore, the personal pronouns of v18a would not be interpreted according to their normal function, but instead weakened into an indefinite “one.”^{viii}

A second way to interpret this objector’s argument is to extend his words through the end of v19^{ix}. The objector is thus saying the following, “James, let’s say you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith without any works (which is impossible) and I will show you my faith by my works (which is, of course, impossible also because faith cannot be seen!) Let me prove my point. You, James, believe in God plus you do good works. The demons also believe just like you, yet they clearly do no good works and instead shudder in fear of judgment. You see, there is no connection between faith and works.” This interpretation is best for four reasons. First, it avoids the exegetical difficulties of the above view’s interpretation of *καγω* and the personal pronouns of 18a. Second, the sarcastic debating technique of v18 is seen in numerous examples of ancient Greek diatribe^x, supporting its use here. Third, James’ strong rebuke in v20, introduced by “but” (*δέ*), makes the most sense directly following the speech of his opponent. Finally, this view harmonizes best with James’ argument that faith without works is useless in evidencing one’s faith to the world and brings terrible consequences of spiritual impoverishment and divine judgment^{xi}.

In conclusion, the “someone” of v18 is a hypothetical opponent of James who argues through the end of v19 that faith and works are not related.

ⁱ The plurality of views stems from among other things a lack of quotation marks in Greek manuscripts and divergent interpretations of the remainder of James 2:14-26.

ⁱⁱ This ally would in effect be saying, “You [the professor] have faith; and I have works. But you cannot show me your faith because you do not have works; I, on the other hand, can show you my faith by my works.” (Douglas J. Moo, *James* in “Pillar NT Commentary” (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub, 1954. 126-30). For representative views see, Spiros Zodhiates, *The Behavior of Belief – An Exposition of James Based Upon the Original Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub, 1959), Part 2, pgs. 21-25 and Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub, 1954), 51-52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moo, 126-30.

^{iv} Moo, 126-30 and Scott McKnight, “James 2:18a: The Unidentifiable Interlocutor” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1990), 355-364.

^v This Jewish opponent would be saying, “You [James] claim to have faith, and I can just as well claim to have works. But you cannot show me your faith apart from works, whereas I, if I wanted, could show you my faith by my works. Your faith is no better than demons’ faith!” (Moo, 126-30).

^{vi} McKnight, 355-364.

^{vii} Moo, 126-30.

^{viii} Moo, 126-30.

^{ix} Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville: Schoettle Pub, 1993), 191-3 and Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House eds. *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub, 1999).

^x Martin Dibelius, *James*, rev. Heinrich Greevan, trans. Michael A. Williams, ed. Helmut Koester, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, Eng. ed. 1976), 154-55 cited in Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville: Schoettle Pub, 1993), 192.

^{xi} A defense of this interpretation of James’ argument is beyond the scope of this paper. Dillow, pp 188-194, offers an excellent defense.