

James Outline

Introduction: James is a letter famous for being hated. Martin Luther famously called James “an epistle of straw”, and he argued strongly for James to be dropped from the New Testament. While Luther allowed the book to remain out of concern for tradition, he said it shouldn’t be considered among the “chief, proper epistles”.

The reason for all this anxiety stems from the way in which the Letter of James writes about the relationship between faith and works. While Paul writes on endlessly about the importance of faith, James asks snidely, “Can faith alone save you?” (James 2:14) positive that the answer is negative. Indeed, on the surface of it, it looks like James is almost an “anti-Paul”, a counter argument to the entire Pauline emphasis on grace alone.

Now, as much as I love conflict and argue the Bible is meant to be read as a collection of diverse voices rather than as if it’s one voice all saying the same thing, I must step in here and argue that Paul and James may not be quite as at odds as it first appears.

Paul’s task is to enfold Gentiles into an essentially Jewish story. The way Paul does this is radical: he rejects the widespread assumption that Christians must first become Jews. When Paul pits faith against works- it isn’t “work” in general that Paul rails against, but, rather, specific works like circumcision, for instance. What Paul is arguing is that faith in Jesus Christ is all a Gentile need profess- they don’t also need to follow food restrictions and become circumcised to boot.

James on the other hand is writing about something entirely different. James writes about talking the talk and then walking the walk. When James writes about the necessity of “works”, he isn’t talking about the need for Gentiles to become Jewish, he’s writing about Christians not just saying they believe in Jesus, but actually acting like they love Jesus, too.

Unlike Paul or Letter of Hebrews, the letter of James isn’t doing sophisticated theology and building large, elaborate arguments for belief, rather he is simply getting after a community who professes Christ with their lips, but then in act and deed ignore poor people in favor of rich, talk smack behind each other’s back all day, and in general wish they could just fit in with the world around them. James is a terribly important letter whenever we are tempted to say one thing and do another...in other words it’s an important letter for all of us.

Chapter 1: General advice; exhortation to be ‘doers of the word and not merely hearers’

Chapter 2: Criticism regarding favoritism; faith without words is dead

Chapter 3: The importance of the tongue/speech; the two kinds of wisdom

Chapter 4: Criticism of internal disputes and a call to stop judging one another

Chapter 5: Warning against the rich; the prayer of faith

Stories to know: “Faith without works dead” (2); the importance of right speech (3); the prayer of faith (5)