

THEOLOGY FROM SCRATCH— WEEK 9



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is St. James the Minor by Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640),
on display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain.*

Week 9 covers chapter two of James. James starts off blasting partiality (prejudice) and then moves on to how works is an important element in practicing Christianity.

This is a difficult section, but not as difficult as it seems at first glance.

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Dialogue 41 — Partiality

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? — James 2:1–7 (NKJV)

This is easy to say but hard to do.

We are marinated in a culture of status. This is most obvious in television commercials, where we’re told we must have the right clothing, or the latest phone, or a cool car to be accepted. At least we no longer have to smoke the right cigarette.

We agree on something.

This is also why some schools have uniforms—to prevent students from displaying their status through their clothing. This extreme approach counters the brutal way that teens often treat each other.

You don’t have to tell me about that; I’ve seen it plenty.

Adults are more restrained than teens, but the sin DNA is still there. We tend to discriminate, though often subconsciously.

“Sin DNA.” What a strange way to describe it.

I didn’t invent it. It’s just a colloquialism that emphasizes that our sinful nature is innate.

Here, James commands us to fight this sinful tendency and to give equal treatment to all. To bolster his argument, James points out that the rich tend to be oppressors. Note that “*drag you into courts*,” is about civil lawsuits. Criminal cases are “dragged into courts” by the government.

In Biblical times, oppression was normally how people got rich. There was no patent law and no industrialization. The modern ways with which one person can legitimately create great wealth didn’t exist.

Instead, all production, and thus all wealth, came from manual labor. For people to get rich, they had to garner the wealth produced by the labors of others. Good management can help, but only to a limited extent.

And people tend to fight over money, the same as how students today battle for status in school—except that with adults, this often ends up in court.

Wealth may work differently now, but the principle is the same. It is possible to generate wealth through inventions and industrialization that don't take advantage of other people, but that's not usually the case.

Yeah, I can think of some rich folks who “deserve” to be rich because of their contribution to our civilization, but it definitely isn't most of them.

Even for the ones who, as you say, “deserve” wealth, the sinful attitudes are the same. So James issues a stern warning.

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.

What does he mean by “partiality”?

Rather than try to pick apart the Greek, I think its meaning is best understood from the examples he gives.

For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” have you not shown partiality.

But then James really lowers the boom. He notes that the poor have a spiritual advantage.

Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

That feels like a threat.

I get that feeling too. James is warning his readers to beware; they could miss out. Not paying attention to what someone has to say, just because he doesn't have status, can be a big mistake. Those poor people whom you might think you can ignore are actually heirs to the kingdom.

Seems like everything James says runs counter to popular cultural attitudes.

Actually, there's a popular book titled *Christian Counter-Culture* that gets deeply into this point. Curiously, it's not about James, but about the Sermon on the Mount.

Why shouldn't the same themes run through everything in your religion?

Exactly. More on this tomorrow.

Dialogue 42 — Major Sins

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. — James 2:8–13 (NKJV)

Wow. James is still making a big deal about partiality. It’s not exactly one of the seven deadly sins, right?

Right. The “marquee” sins don’t need much explanation or emphasis; everyone knows not to do them. Just as how James went down an unusual path when he said, “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials,*” he’s sending out an unexpected message.

That leads to a secondary point worth mentioning—this is advanced teaching. He’s not giving the beginner’s lessons—the ones that are obvious to most folks—he’s on to the advanced stuff. This isn’t milk; it’s solid food.

Duly noted.

So, in this advanced lesson, note that the people we might show partiality towards (or against) are our “neighbors.” So, the “love your neighbor” bit isn’t only about the folks that live on your street.

James’s point here is, “*if you show partiality, you commit sin.*” Do not miss how strongly James is saying this. Partiality is the antithesis of loving your neighbor. James is implying that it’s on the level of adultery and murder.

Wow.

James uses a bit of sarcasm to make his case. His example is pretty silly—someone who thinks he’s hot stuff because he doesn’t commit adultery, even though he’s a murderer.

That’s ridiculous. James is poking fun at our tendency to excuse our weaknesses while exalting our strengths. We all do this, even if we don’t realize it.

Those of us who show favoritism likely think favoritism is a minor sin compared to marquee sins like adultery and murder.

But it’s not.

This is one of those bits of Biblical teaching that we all memorize and can dutifully recite when asked but don’t really take to heart.

Are all sins really equal?

No, and James isn't saying that. What he is saying is that favoritism is one of the big ones.

If that seems extreme, consider this—"What separates the major sins from the minor ones?"

How they affect others. If there's no victim, it isn't as bad.

That's true in civilian law—as it should be—but it's not the only key in the kingdom of God. How your sin affects others is still **one of** the keys, but for a related but curiously different reason.

Sin that impacts others acts like a force multiplier. A sin that impacts others can spawn sin in them in a sort of chain reaction. That makes it worse than other sins because of its impact on God's glory. One sin can be the mother of countless more.

I see. It's sort of a different scoring system.

I suppose you could say it that way.

But there's another major factor, the sin's relationship with the root of sin—pride. C.S. Lewis's description of pride explains this elegantly.

"The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the ultimate anti-God state of mind."

Partiality is very close to pride because it lacks the obvious causes. You don't have to wonder why people steal or commit adultery. Temptation and selfishness explain them easily.

But partiality lacks those kinds of motives; it's roots are deeper, closer to pride. Why favor someone with worldly status, if not to boost your own?

Yeah, I guess it is kind of creepy when you think about it.

So, partiality scores high on both points—maybe not as high as murder or adultery, but still pretty high. It has great potential to lead to a whole host of other sins, thus doing a lot of damage.

Partiality obviously impacts others in a way that can embarrass the LORD, plus irritate them in a way that can trigger their sinful nature. Plus, its connection to pride is strong.

So, it's worse even than one might guess.

Yup. This kicks up a level tomorrow.

Dialogue 43 — Dead Faith

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. — James 2:14–17 (ESV)

What is “that faith”?

This isn’t about whether salvation is by faith alone. Of course it is. This is about, “What is saving faith?” That’s why James says, “*that faith*,” instead of just, “*faith*.”

James is making it clear that faith without works is not saving faith.

Okay, but why?

Gaining saving faith is much more than just changing your mind on an issue of doctrine. It’s a Holy Spirit-driven transformation. A transformed person acts like a transformed person. Someone who doesn’t act transformed, isn’t transformed.

Okay, but transformation of what?

Character, self, sense of self, attitude. It’s systemic.

Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. — Ephesians 4:22b–24 (ESV)

This wouldn’t be such a confusing issue for Americans if we hadn’t watered down the gospel so much. We tend to think of the sinner’s prayer as some kind of magical phrase that saves.

That’s not what it is.

Then what is it?

It’s supposed to be a sinner announcing his change. The change is from self-focus to kingdom-focus. “Jesus is Lord” is a pledge of loyalty, not merely a statement of fact.

The *new self* is a team player with a team agenda. “Looking out for number one” no longer means what it used to mean.

So, you can tell who’s changed just by lookin’ at ‘em, right?

Right, but then James goes nuclear. *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

‘Scuse me, but doesn’t “sola fide” mean that faith yields eternal life? Doesn’t faith, even without works, at least initiate eternal life?

Can’t such a person be “getting close” or something like that? Can’t the works get going as the new Christian grows in maturity?

James explicitly shoots that idea down. Faith without works has no life in it at all.

Okay, then I really don’t get this. Doesn’t something grow? Should we really look for the same kind of works in a new Christian that we look for in mature ones?

Bingo. Yes, something grows, but yes, we should look for the same “kind” of works from new Christians.

So, how’s that okay?

Because being “good at” being a Christian is not what matters. Having the right “team spirit”, is what makes you a team member.

Let’s not get hung up on the definition of the word “kind” here. New Christians can be downright comically bad at their works. What’s important is that their heart is in the right place.

This is a complex subject, and getting educated can be remarkably difficult, but two excellent books on how to do good works well are: *When Helping Hurts* and *Toxic Charity*.

Wow, those are head-slapping titles.

Well, even a world-class soccer player can score an own-goal. Having your heart in the right place is a clear sign of faith, but that doesn’t mean you can’t cause a lot of harm.

One of the curious aspects of Christianity is the immense amount of training that’s involved—and not just about doctrine. Beginner Christians have a lot to learn. Of course, we all do.

In fact, one of the main “works” that Christians should pay attention to is working on their own growth. If a Christian (new or mature) starts thinking that they’ve “arrived,” that should set off alarm bells.

Personal growth, or as I’ve already labeled it “sanctification,” is a lifelong process. Every Christian should be setting goals for growth.

I wish everyone would take their New Year’s resolutions more seriously. That includes me.

Me too. So, does this make sense now?

Yeah. Let’s keep going tomorrow.

Dialogue 44 — Demon Faith

But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! — James 2:18–19 (ESV)

Why would someone say, in response to James’s point about the necessity of works, “*You have faith and I have works*”? That doesn’t fit.

It sounds odd in English. What the hypothetical “someone” is saying in Greek is like, “One person has faith and another has works.”

But then he talks about the demons having faith. That’s creepy. Even demons have faith?

Yup. As if James’s argument isn’t already strong enough, he takes it up another notch by noting that demons have faith too. Yet they aren’t saved—and they know it.

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” — Mark 1:23–24 (ESV)

Obviously, that faith cannot be saving faith.

Okay, I’ll ask the obvious set-up questions. Why isn’t it? Is it that the demon didn’t exactly say the words, “Jesus is Lord.”? Is it that the demon had faith without works?

The answer is that the demon effectively said that Jesus is **the** Lord but he didn’t confess Him as **his** Lord. So, it’s anything but a confession of faith.

In fact, the demon’s words are the exact opposite. They’re cleverly scripted to oppose Jesus’s agenda (by revealing His deity, which Jesus doesn’t want people to know yet).

So, in a way, that was a “work,” but for the “other side,” right?

Exactly. So, the first thing Jesus does is silence him.

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” — Mark 1:25 (ESV)

Jesus has the power to force the demon to do His will because He’s **the** Lord.

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. — Mark 1:26 (ESV)

So, in a sense Jesus **is** his lord, because He can force him to do whatever he wants.

But the demon clearly doesn’t want to obey, so he’s not a member of Jesus’s kingdom. That’s why he says, “*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.*”

Do not miss how harsh James's point is here. He is directly comparing demons to people who have faith without works.

So, James is saying that they're as bad as demons?!?

No, they're not as bad as demons, but they're as unsaved.

Wow! That's downright nasty.

Is it? They're in great danger.

If James gets their attention and they avoid disaster as a result, is his style a good thing or a bad thing?

What I don't get is that their future is no better than a demon's. Make sense out of that.

It's basically a binary result. You're either in or out.

Are there absolutely no gradations of outcome?

Yes, there are, but the main division is still binary.

This is way too advanced a topic for now, but I do want to clear up a common misconception—demons do not “run” hell.

Many popular books, even Christian ones like *The Screwtape Letters*, show demons running hell.

Yes, but they're all comedy or lessons about things other than hell. *Screwtape* is great teaching about human nature, but it isn't meant to be taken literally. The scripture references about hell all show the demons being torturees, not torturers.

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’” — Matthew 25:41 (ESV)

Same thing for Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. It's obviously not meant to be an accurate portrayal of hell.

So, what does the Bible say about hell?

There are a few vague images about fire. It's not what the Bible says will happen, but what won't happen that's the key.

The damned are “cast out” from paradise (Matt 22:13, Luke 12:5, Luke 13:28, John 6:37, John 12:31) and the door is shut (Matthew 25:10, Luke 13:25).

We can't really envision heaven or hell with any precision. Suffice it to say, hell is worse.

No surprise there. See you tomorrow.

Dialogue 45 — Living Faith

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

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

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. — James 2:20–26 (NKJV)

How do you reconcile this with sola fide?

Yeah, this is the “gotcha” passage for anyone who doesn’t subscribe to “sola fide.” They see Abraham’s works as being something more than just faith in action.

But remember when I said that you had just wandered into the doctrine of sanctification?

Sure.

Well, you just wandered into it again.

Here, James says, “*Faith without works is dead.*” Okay, let me ask you this, “What’s the difference between alive and dead?”

Movement?

Not bad, but I’d say that the difference between alive and dead is the difference between growth and decay. A living thing is either growing or at least growing bits to replace what’s lost or consumed. Once death sets in, all growth stops and decay begins.

The key to this passage is, “*Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?*”

This ties in with everything I’ve said about how growth plays a central role in God’s purposes. The works are essential to the growth (specifically here, making faith perfect).

Let’s take a deeper look into what was going on with Abraham’s faith, and I think you’ll see how this all connects.

Okay.

So, the backstory here is that Abraham and Sarah had made one of the biggest faith goofs of all time. The result was Ishmael—who is a relentless reminder of their failure. Sarah

even goes totally ballistic about this at one point. That hints at a lot more marital friction than just what's recorded in scripture.

Yeah, but Sarah suggested to whole madcap scheme to begin with. Shouldn't that have helped tamp down her response?

Hah! Let me ask you this, "Do you think that Sarah's memory of her role in all this lessens her pain or makes it greater?"

Oh, yikes. Never mind. No wonder she had such a hair trigger.

So, this sets the stage for what's in Abraham's head as he heads out to sacrifice Isaac. He has great faith, but could it use a little "perfecting"?

I suppose.

We cannot know what Abraham was thinking as he prepared to kill Isaac, but c'mon. His past failure had to be weighing on him. He's under great stress. So, what's he praying?

That he'll catch a break.

Surely. Every moment that he doesn't catch a break, the stress builds. Then Isaac asks him, "*Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*" — Genesis 22:7b (NKJV)

Burn!

Abraham makes up an answer, but he has to be hoping and praying that it's not a lie.

Finally, we get to the moment when Abraham raises the knife. God knows what Abraham is thinking and he's not faking it; he's about to kill Isaac. Then, and only then, does God let him off.

So, did this help "perfect" Abraham's faith?

Okay, I see what you mean.

James's point in this passage is that you have to "practice" your faith to grow it. That's what happened with Abraham. The result of his practicing his faith was that it grew. His already great faith was *made perfect*.

And, by my definition of alive vs. dead, if faith isn't growing from practice, it's dead.

So, you're saying that works is practicing faith, which is how faith grows, otherwise it's dead.

That's definitely the meaning of James's Abraham example.

I get that.

On to tomorrow!