

New Testament Literature — James and Paul

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson

Session 30

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Justification, Faith, Works, James, Paul, Judaizers, Mosaic Law, Charity, Riches, Testing

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson examines the apparent theological tension between James and Paul regarding justification, faith, and works. He demonstrates that rather than contradicting each other, Paul addresses legalism and nationalism regarding the Mosaic Law, while James confronts indifference and inaction toward the poor. By redefining their distinct usages of 'faith,' 'works,' and 'justification,' Mathewson reveals that genuine faith is inherently faithful and validated through loving obedience. Additionally, the lecture highlights James's practical exhortations on handling trials with endurance, avoiding partiality regarding wealth, and engaging in patient, humble prayer.

Outline

I. Introduction: Re-evaluating the Relationship Between James and Paul

- A. Primary focus on James 2:14–26 as the theological heart of the letter
- B. Historical and canonical framework of interpretation
 - 1. Influence of Martin Luther and the Reformation emphasis on justification by faith alone
 - 2. Prioritizing Pauline epistles as a "canon within the canon" or interpretive filter
 - 3. Early church manuscript ordering placed James before Paul, showing no intent of hierarchical ranking
- C. Methodological approach: Allow each apostolic author their own distinct voice before seeking canonical synthesis

II. Divergent Historical Contexts and Target Issues

- A. Paul's context and central concern
 - 1. Confronting Judaizers demanding Gentile compliance with the Mosaic Law
 - 2. Combating legalism (earning status) and nationalism (using law as a Jewish boundary marker)
 - 3. Core assertion: Justification is by grace through faith in Christ apart from works of the law
- B. James's context and central concern
 - 1. Confronting practical indifference and lack of charity toward brothers and sisters in dire need
 - 2. Combating passive orthodoxy that excuses inaction under the guise of mere verbal profession
 - 3. Core assertion: Faith apart from practical works of love and charity is dead and cannot save

III. Clarifying Distinct Terminological Usage

A. The meaning of "Faith"

1. Paul: Wholehearted trust, personal commitment, and reliance on Jesus Christ
2. James (in James 2:19): Mere intellectual assent to correct doctrine (e.g., God is one), shared even by demons
3. Three integrated aspects of true faith in James: intellectual assent, wholehearted commitment, and ongoing faithfulness

B. The meaning of "Works"

1. Paul: "Works of the Law" (Mosaic ceremonial compliance as boundary markers)
2. James: Practical deeds of love, mercy, and charity toward the needy

C. The meaning of "Justification"

1. Paul: Initial vindication and entrance into righteous status before God
2. James: Validation, maturation, and perfection of faith through active obedience (e.g., Abraham offering Isaac)

IV. The Canonical Complementarity of James and Paul

A. Essential underlying harmony between both authors

1. Paul affirms that believers are created in Christ Jesus for good works (Ephesians 2:8–10)
2. New Covenant transformation inherently includes heart obedience and dynamic life change

B. Pastoral application in the Christian life

1. Hear Paul when tempted toward self-righteousness, legalism, or pride in personal performance
2. Hear James when tempted toward spiritual complacency, indifference, or reliance on past conversion without present obedience

V. Additional Key Themes in the Letter of James

A. Trials and endurance (James 1)

1. God allows trials to test, mature, and strengthen faith into perseverance
2. Temptation to sin originates from internal human desires rather than God (James 1:13–15)

B. Riches and poverty (James 1 & 5)

1. Warning to wealthy Christians against evaluating personal worth by temporary material wealth (James 1:9–11)
2. Condemnation of non-Christian wealthy landowners who hoard riches and oppress vulnerable laborers (James 5:1–6)

C. Prayer, healing, and divine sovereignty (James 4 & 5)

1. Exhortation to call church elders to pray over the sick in faith (James 5:13–18)
2. Unanswered prayer linked to selfish motives and lack of asking (James 4:1–3)
3. Submitting all future plans and desires to the sovereign will of God (James 4:13–17)