

FAITH & WORKS

A Clarification of
“Faith Without Works Is Dead”

JAMES 2:14-26

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Faith & Works: A Clarification of James 2:14-26

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What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

This passage of Scripture has been confusing to many and subject to various interpretations over the years. But what exactly does it mean? Who is it written to? Does James contradict what Paul wrote to the Ephesians,

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Eph. 2:8-9)

When people hear a clear explanation of the Gospel of grace and how salvation from Hell is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ and His finished work alone, it is common for them to retort, "But faith without works is dead!" They usually mean by this that faith *plus* works saves a person from Hell to Heaven and not faith alone. Sometimes this is done by preachers with hopes of motivating their listeners to greater faithfulness and fruitfulness as they wax eloquently from the pulpit and declare, "But faith without works is dead being alone!

To others, "faith without works is dead" is understood to mean that true "saving faith" *will always be* accompanied by good works; and if it isn't, this is proof that you never had real "saving faith" and were never really saved or one of the elect.¹ But this line of reasoning immediately raises questions

¹ For a thorough explanation showing that a certain "kind" of faith is not what saves, but faith or trust in the right object, namely, Jesus Christ alone, see J. B. Hixson, "The Nature of Saving Faith" in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Free Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 139-93; and *ibid.*, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, rev. ed. (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 85-136.

like, “How often must a person work, or how many works are necessary, before he can know with certainty that he truly possesses genuine ‘saving faith’?”

This same concept is sometimes communicated by the catchy phrase: “Faith alone saves, but genuine saving faith is never alone.” Is this popular cliché correct, or is it an oxymoron and a contradictory statement?

To correctly answer these questions about James 2 will require that we carefully examine its context, observe its content, and compare Scripture with Scripture. In addition, to arrive at the correct interpretation of this passage will require asking and answering the following questions:

- a. Is James writing to believers or unbelievers?
- b. What is the context of this book and passage?
- c. Is James writing to question his readers’ eternal salvation or the salvation of others by examining their good works or the lack thereof?
- d. What kind of “salvation” is James addressing in this passage—spiritual or physical; and if spiritual, then in what tense or stage—salvation from sin’s penalty, power, or presence?
- e. What is the issue that James is addressing in this passage? Is it the evidence of good works in initial “saving faith,” or is it the profitability to others of a supposed sanctifying faith that does not manifest itself to others by beneficial good works?
- f. Is James referring to justification before God or justification before men?

If we can correctly and contextually answer these important questions, I believe the truth of James 2 will become evident. So let’s begin with our first question.

a. Is James writing to believers or unbelievers?

Determining the original, intended recipients of this epistle is necessary to correctly interpret this portion of Scripture. What

does the epistle of James tell us about the identity of its readers?

James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings. My brethren [a term for a fellow-believer in the family of God], count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (Jam. 1:1-4)

Would you tell unbelievers to count it all joy when they fall into various trials because God wants to test or refine their faith? No! They *do not have faith yet* in the Lord Jesus Christ in order for it to be refined! But this would certainly be an appropriate exhortation for a child of God in the family of God whose faith is being tested by trials.

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (Jam. 1:12)

James reminds these believers of a reward that they may obtain called “the crown of life” if they faithfully endure these tests of their faith. Eternal salvation is not a reward but the gift of God (Eph. 2:8; Rom. 6:23). Rewards or crowns are given to faithful believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, *my beloved brethren*. (Jam. 1:13-16)

Salvation	Rewards
1. is offered to <i>unbelievers</i> .	1. are offered to <i>believers</i> .
2. is appropriated by <i>grace through faith alone in Christ alone apart from works</i> . (Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8-9)	2. are obtained by <i>grace through on-going faith resulting in Christ-honoring works</i> . (1 Cor. 3:5-13)
3. is the believer's <i>present possession</i> . (John 3:16-18, 36)	3. are the believer's possible <i>future attainment</i> . (1 Cor. 3:14)
4. is received the <i>moment of faith in Christ</i> . (John 5:24)	4. are given out at the <i>Judgment Seat of Christ after the Rapture</i> . (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10)
5. can <i>never</i> be lost. (1 Cor. 3:15)	5. <i>may be lost</i> . (1 Cor. 3:11-15)
6. solely involves <i>trusting in Christ</i> . (What do you think of Christ?)	6. involve . . . a. the <i>quality of one's post-justification works</i> . (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10-11) b. one's <i>faithfulness to God's will and Word</i> . (1 Cor. 4:2; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; 2 John 8-11) c. one's <i>motives before God</i> . (Matt. 6:1-6; 1 Cor. 4:4; Col. 3:23-25)
7. determines one's <i>eternal destiny</i> . (1 John 5:11-13)	7. determine your <i>function and privilege in Heaven</i> . (Phil. 3:11-14; 2 Peter 1:11)
8. makes one <i>accepted before God</i> . (Eph. 1:6)	8. reflects that one's post-salvation life was <i>well-pleasing to God</i> . (2 Cor. 5:9)
9. will result in <i>praise to God</i> . (Rev. 5:8-14)	9. will result in <i>praise to God</i> . (Rev. 4:9-11)

James warns these believers that temptation never comes from God and temptation yielded to results in sin and death (loss of fellowship with God) in their walk with the Lord. As members of the family of God ("brethren"), and therefore specially loved by God ("beloved"), these believers were not to be deceived about these truths. Sometimes there are those who question the reality of the eternal salvation of these believers by saying they were just "physical" brethren (fellow Jews; cf. Jam. 1:1) but not "spiritual" brethren (fellow believers). But what saith the Scriptures?

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures. (Jam. 1:17-18)

James reminds these believers that every gift that is good comes down from God (unlike temptation that comes from below), such as when God provided in His plan ("of His own will") the good gift of the new birth ("He brought us forth") which came to us from above, i.e., from God (John 3:3-7). The original readers of this epistle were not merely physical brethren but spiritual brethren because they had been born again from above. Rather than James questioning whether his readers were truly born again, he affirms their spiritual status as genuine brethren by addressing them as "*my beloved brethren*" (Jam. 1:19). To call them "beloved brethren" is fully in keeping with his acknowledgment that they are members of the family of God through their new birth. James later goes on to state,

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. (Jam. 2:1)

James not only calls his readers "brethren" but he clearly recognizes that these individuals had faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. However, he challenges them to not hold this faith in Christ

with partiality toward the rich (which he illustrates in 2:1-4). He then exhorts them about their inconsistent practice which involved personal favoritism toward the rich. He writes,

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* [which is the name of our Lord Jesus Christ]? (Jam. 2:5-7)

James acknowledges that these believers had become spiritually rich in or by means of faith and were heirs of the kingdom. Does that sound like a description of an unbeliever or that James was questioning whether they were “really saved”? Not at all! He later warns them about the great responsibility of being teachers of the Word of God that comes by God’s grace. He admonishes,

My *brethren*, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that *we* shall receive a stricter judgment. (Jam. 3:1)

James includes himself (and James was a believer) in this exhortation. He then warns them further in this epistle about the power of the tongue for either building up or tearing down other fellow believers by stating further,

Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My *brethren*, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my *brethren*, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh. (Jam. 3:10-12)

Do not speak evil of one another, *brethren*. (Jam. 4:11)

And then James writes about how these Christians should respond right when they had been done wrong by some rich

people who defrauded them of their rightful wages,

Therefore, be patient, *brethren*, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, *brethren*, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! My *brethren*, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord – that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. But above all, my *brethren*, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes,” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No,” lest you fall into judgment. (Jam. 5:7-12)

Would you instruct the unsaved to be patient until the coming of the Lord? Never! The unsaved need to hear the Gospel and “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” so that they “will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Unbelievers would want to avoid the coming of the Lord instead of finding comfort in His promised return. All these encouragements about God’s purposes in allowing suffering in the lives of believers underscore the fact that James has only believers in Christ in view as his audience. In keeping with their suffering and these believers being part of a local church, James continues:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for *the elders of the church*. (Jam. 5:13-14)

While many unbelievers today attend local churches, this was not normally the case in the early Church when persecution

occurred such as in James's day. Whether it is through false teaching or persecution (two of Satan's favorite strategies to defeat believers), believers may be deceived or led astray. Thus, James ends this epistle by writing,

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (Jam. 5:19-20)

From the beginning (1:2) to the end (5:19) of his epistle, James refers to his audience by the phrase "brethren" *fifteen times* (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). In addition, James states with certainty that his readers were "brought . . . forth" (1:18; i.e., born again), had "faith" in Jesus Christ (2:1, 5), were "heirs of the kingdom" (2:5), could receive a "reward" if they endured their trials successfully (1:12), and were instructed or exhorted repeatedly with commands and warnings which would only be appropriate if they were already children of God. Nowhere in this epistle do we see even one invitation for them to believe the Gospel of Christ and be eternally saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Why? It is because they had already believed when they were born again (1:18)! In a later epistle, the apostle Peter would similarly write:

Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever." Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23-25)

b. What is the context of this book and passage?

In our quick perusal of the book of James to answer our first

question, we have understood that James is writing to believers in Christ who were facing various trials and personal suffering by the unsaved, and in particular, the rich. All of this was allowed by God to “test” their faith in order for their faith to grow, leading to greater spiritual maturity in their Christian lives.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect [spiritually mature] and complete [spiritually balanced], lacking nothing. (Jam. 1:2-4)

Trials would provide these believers a wonderful opportunity to learn not only to trust the Lord from day by day but also to love one another, as expressed through beneficial good works that would minister to the spiritual and physical needs of these suffering brethren. But this walk of faith and practical love would occur only if they were to hear the Word of God and apply it by faith to their daily lives. This train of thought and significant point are essential to grasp if you are going to understand James 2:14-26 and many other passages in the book of James. Thus, leading up to James 2, we read:

But be doers [appliers] of the word [by faith], and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in

their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. (Jam. 1:22-27)

James has sometimes been called the epistle of practical Christianity because he repeatedly exhorts believers under his pastoral care to apply the Word of God by faith, resulting in the control of one's tongue, ministering to the needs of those who are poor or cannot reciprocate (like orphans and widows), and to keep oneself uncontaminated by the wisdom of the world. All of these things that are mentioned in 1:22-27 are illustrated and expanded in the remaining chapters of the epistle of James.

James utilizes a very life-like illustration to help his readers relate to being a doer of the Word and not only a hearer. He writes,

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 [or motives]? (Jam. 2:1-4)

Those believers guilty of partiality or personal favoritism based on economic status were not "unspotted from the world" but were actually operating out of human wisdom and earthly values. They were hearers of the Word but not doers or applicers by faith of God's truth in this matter. These human viewpoint actions then incited the following rebuke by James,

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? 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. (Jam. 2:5-9)

To have faith in Jesus Christ (which they did) coupled with personal favoritism toward the rich (which some did) is inconsistent with God's calling by grace (2:5), practical need (2:6-7), and the royal law of love (2:8-9) that they should have applied toward their fellow believers. When they were functioning in their local assembly in this manner (2:1-4), they were not doers of the Word (though saved) but hearers only, deceiving themselves. James follows up with another personal and practical challenge by forcefully stating,

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 [like James 1:22 commands] 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. (Jam. 2:10-13)

All this sets the table for James 2:14-26 to now be spiritually chewed, swallowed, and digested properly. So let's grab a fork and a knife and begin!

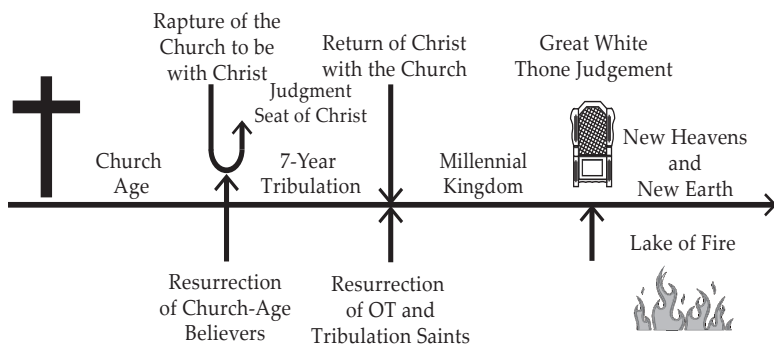
c. Is James writing to question his reader's eternal salvation or the salvation of others by examining their good works or the lack thereof?

The answer to this question is clearly "No!" Rather than questioning their eternal salvation, James is concerned about the

future judgment of these believers' works for a possible reward. Thus, he writes,

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. (Jam. 2:12-13)

One truth that is interwoven throughout the text of James is the recurring theme of believers standing before the Lord one day at the future Judgment Seat of Christ to have their Christian lives evaluated by Him for the purpose of determining an eternal reward. This future judgment does not serve the purpose of determining whether one has been saved or not, or whether they will go to Heaven or not since this judgment is only for believers who will already be in Heaven. Though one's eternal destiny is the very first issue that needs to be settled forever between a sinner and a holy God, this is a nonissue to James since his readers were already born again (1:18) and described as "heirs of the kingdom" (2:5). In addition, several reasons were stated earlier to show that James regarded his audience as "brethren" who were definitely in the family of God.



The future judgment that James has in view throughout his epistle is a divine evaluation by Jesus Christ of the believer's post-justification life, faith, and good works flowing from a daily walk of practical sanctification. This judgment will determine whether believers will receive a "crown" (1:12) or not for enduring trials and faithfully serving their Lord and Sav-

ior. This future judgment will be related to their future glorification. James refers to this divine accountability and future judgment by the Lord in every chapter of his epistle (1:12; 2:12, 13; 3:1; 4:11-12; 5:7-9). Believers will be judged one day by the criteria of the royal law of liberty (which is the principle of love) to determine whether they will receive a reward or not from the Lord. Their daily walk of faith and beneficial works of love, especially to needy fellow believers, are essential to being doers of the Word and not hearers only. Thus, it should not surprise us to read James continuing this same flow of thought by stating,

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (Jam. 2:14-17)

Many people have wrong opinions about this text either because they read James 2:14-26 in isolation from its context, or only in a cursory manner, or perhaps because of theological bias they bring to the text, or as a result of erroneous exegesis. Whatever the reason, there are a few common, false interpretations of this passage, such as the following:

- 1) Faith *and* good works are both necessary for a sinner to be saved from Hell and to receive eternal life in Heaven.
- 2) For a person to claim to have faith but not have good works means that he really doesn't have "saving faith" any longer, or perhaps he never had it to begin with, but he only possesses an intellectual assent to some Christian dogma like the demons do.
- 3) Faith alone saves but it is energized by good works in the believer's Christian life.

So what exactly is James teaching in this passage that many find to be so perplexing? Is James writing to question his reader's eternal salvation or the salvation of others by examining their good works or the lack thereof? Some conclude this because the following verses read,

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (Jam. 2:14)

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (Jam. 2:17)

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? (Jam. 2:20)

What we established earlier is that James is nowhere questioning the genuine eternal salvation of his readers because:

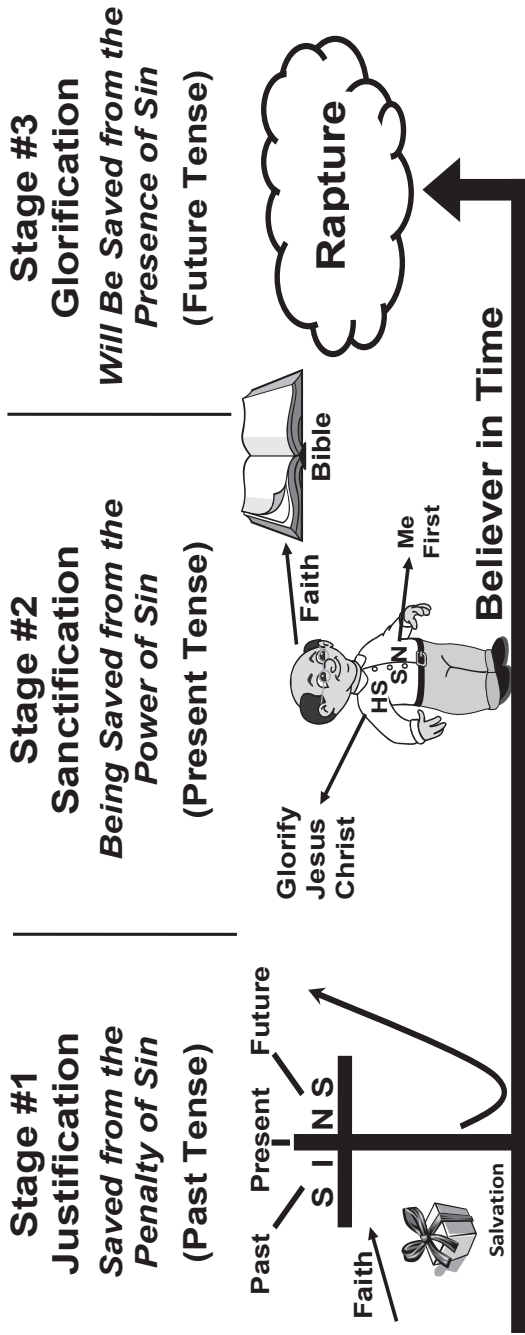
- 1) He calls them "brethren" (2:14), i.e., fellow members of the family of God.
- 2) He states that they have "faith" in verse 20, but without works their faith is "dead" or separated from its intended objective in their Christian lives, namely, being "doers of the Word and not hearers only."
- 3) He never calls on them to do what God instructs the lost person to do, namely, to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

Why doesn't James appeal to them to believe in Christ? It is because they were already born again (1:18) and spiritual members of the family of God (1:19).

d. What kind of "salvation" is James addressing in this passage – spiritual or physical salvation; and if spiritual, then in what tense or stage – salvation from sin's penalty, power, or presence?

SALVATION ALL BY GOD'S GRACE

Deliverance in Stages 1, 2, and 3 of Salvation



Titus 3:5
Ephesians 2:8-9
Luke 7:50

1 Timothy 4:16
James 1:21
Philippians 2:12-13

Romans 5:9-10
Romans 13:11
1 Corinthians 3:15

Perhaps it would be helpful if I took a moment to explain further this question about “salvation.” While a word’s etymology or root meaning plays an important part in understanding the concept being communicated by the word, the usage of a word in a particular context ultimately determines that word’s exact meaning. A single word may have a variety of meanings and usages, but a careful examination of the context where it is found clarifies which of those meanings is intended. This is true with the word “salvation.” Depending on the context, salvation may refer to either physical or spiritual deliverance, with the latter being deliverance from sin’s penalty, power, or presence.²

So what kind of “salvation” is James addressing in this passage—spiritual or physical salvation? If he is addressing spiritual salvation, then what tense or stage is he referring to—salvation from sin’s penalty, power, or presence? The answers to those questions are critical in “rightly dividing” this passage and making the correct interpretation. The answer in context is clearly the second tense or phase of spiritual salvation, namely, salvation from the power of sin in present sanctification. Why can we conclude this?

1) James is writing to believers (“brethren”) about salvation, even though he is not referring back to what happened to them in the past (like he does in 1:18 where he states that they had been born again), but he is referring to what was supposed to be occurring in their lives in the present. This points to salvation from sin’s power in their present Christian lives.

2) The word “save” occurs previously in James 1:21 where it refers to second-tense salvation.

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and

² For further explanation of the three tenses of salvation, see Dennis M. Rokser, *Salvation in Three Time Zones* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013).

overflow of wickedness, and *receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.* (Jam. 1:19-21)

This warning is especially pertinent since James had warned earlier about the damaging effects of sin when he wrote,

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. (Jam. 1:15-16)

This understanding of second-tense salvation is also consistent with the possible human reaction of “wrath” by these believers (1:19-20) against those who were persecuting and defrauding them. Thus, the context and flow of thought point to a *spiritual* salvation from the *power* of sin in a believer’s life to a life of holiness and good works that is honoring to the Lord and beneficial to the brethren.

3) In addition, the word “saved” is found again in James 5:19 in reference to a believer’s present sanctification where it reads,

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way *will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.* (Jam. 5:19-20)

Observe again that James is writing to “brethren” (fellow believers) about the possibility of “anyone among you” (fellow believers) possibly “wander[ing] from the truth” practically. Can this believer be restored to fellowship with the Lord? Yes, for “let him know that he who turns a sinner [sinning believer] from the error of his way *will save a soul from death.*” Some commentators understand “death” to be referring to “physical death” as maximum divine discipline for the believer. This interpretation is possible since it agrees with other passages of Scripture (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 11:30-32; 1 John

5:16-18). However, it seems better to understand this death to be in reference to the “temporal death” of a believer who is not having fellowship with the Lord (Luke 15:24; Rom. 8:13; 1 Tim. 5:6). This kind of death was addressed earlier in this same epistle in James 1:15. The “temporal death” view is further supported by the use of the word “error” (*planēs*) in the phrase, “error of his way” (5:20), since a form of this very same word follows the word “death” in 1:15 where James states, “Do not be *deceived* (*planasthe*), my beloved *brethren*” (1:16). Thus, the cluster of the words “brethren” (1:16; 5:19), “death” (1:15; 5:20), “error” (1:16; 5:20), and “save” (1:21; 5:20) parallel one another and seem to form a literary *inclusio*, like bookends, encapsulating the theme of practical sanctification within the epistle of James.

4) The illustration James uses following 2:14 points to the treatment of a fellow believer in present sanctification from sin’s power when he states,

If a *brother* or *sister* is naked and destitute of daily food... (Jam. 2:15)

5) The latter two illustrations of Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25) both clarify that James is referring to second-tense salvation since both Abraham and Rahab are stated in Scripture to be believers in the Lord (Gen. 15:6; Josh. 2:9-11; Heb. 11:31) before the events mentioned by James, and both illustrations indicate some profitable works toward others, resulting from their faith, which were demonstrated sometime *after* they had been justified before God (Gen. 22; Josh. 2:15-23; Heb. 11:8-19, 31).

Based on these five lines of exegetical and contextual support, it is evident that James is addressing genuine believers about being doers of the Word and not hearers only when it comes to their present sanctification or second-tense salvation.

e. What is the issue that James is addressing in this passage? Is it good works as the proof of initial “saving faith,” or is it the genuineness of an ongoing, sanctifying faith in the Christian life that manifests itself in profitable and beneficial good works to others?

We have already explained several pieces of this interpretative puzzle by proving that James is writing to genuine believers about second-tense salvation or practical sanctification as it relates to being doers of the Word and not hearers only, especially as the expression of a walk of faith, love, and good works that meets the genuine needs of others. This conclusion is further substantiated by observing the key words in verse 14:

- 1) “profit” – benefit or advantage
- 2) “my brethren” – fellow believers in Christ
- 3) “faith” – a belief based upon being persuaded that something is true
- 4) “works” – doing the will of God by faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit
- 5) “save” – to deliver someone from danger or damage to a life of spiritual health

The anticipated answer to the rhetorical question of verse 14, “Can faith save him?” is “No.” When a believer claims he is living by faith and experiencing salvation from sin and self but does not have love and good works towards other needy believers, this simply means that this believer is self-deceived. He is being only a hearer of the Word, and not an applier by faith, who is not really being saved from sin’s damaging power in his or her life. James gives a practical illustration of this point, which undoubtedly hit close to home with the persecuted church he was addressing.

If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart

in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? (Jam. 2:15-16)

Notice again that a "brother" or "sister" (believers who are part of the family of God) are in genuine, daily need. But instead of demonstrating a walk of faith and love that issues out in profitable works to meet the needs of others, this believer simply passes on a pious platitude that sounds "spiritual" but misses the point and doesn't meet the need. James observes, "What does it [your faith without good works] profit [others]?" The point of verse 14 is clarified a few verses later when James writes,

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (Jam. 2:17)

The word "dead" in Scripture always carries the idea of "separation," never nonexistence. At physical death there is a *separation* of the soul and spirit from a person's body, yet that person continues to exist either in Heaven or Hell. When we see the body of a deceased person lying in an open casket at a funeral, we do not conclude that the person never really existed in the first place. Just as there is a separation of the soul and spirit from the body without denying the reality of the soul and spirit, *James is not denying the existence or reality of initial faith in Christ for first-tense salvation among his readers whose faith was separated from good works.* The old religious adage about eternal salvation that says "faith alone saves but genuine saving faith is never alone" is not only logically inconsistent and theologically absurd but is also exegetically flawed. James states that "faith *by itself* . . . is dead [i.e., separated]." Can faith be by itself? James says, "Yes!" And this is further confirmed throughout the Word of God by numerous verses that teach that faith alone in Christ alone results in eternal salvation or salvation in the first and third tenses. See John 3:16, 18; Romans 3:27-28; 4:4-5; Galatians 2:16; and Ephesians 2:8-9.

Justification Before God	Practical Sanctification
1. God <i>declares righteous</i> the believing sinner (Rom. 4:1-3).	1. God <i>makes righteous</i> the yielded, dependent believer who responds to God's Word (John 17:17; Gal. 5:16).
2. God <i>imputes</i> righteousness to the believer in his standing before God (Rom. 4:4-8).	2. God <i>imparts</i> righteousness to the believer, affecting his state practically (Heb. 13:21).
3. Occurs <i>outside</i> the believing sinner (1 Cor. 6:11).	3. Occurs <i>inside</i> the responsive believer (Eph. 3:16).
4. Is a one-time event at a <i>point in time</i> when a sinner believes in Christ (Gal. 2:16).	4. Is to be an <i>ongoing</i> process as the believer walks by faith under the Spirit's control (2 Cor. 3:18).
5. Involves salvation from sin's <i>penalty</i> (Rom. 5:9).	5. Involves salvation from sin's <i>power</i> practically (Rom. 6:11-13).
6. Changes a believer's <i>eternal destiny</i> (Titus 3:7).	6. Changes a believer's <i>present life</i> (Eph. 5:15-16).
7. Results in having <i>peace with</i> God (Rom. 5:1).	7. Results in having the <i>peace of</i> God (Phil. 4:9).
8. Is <i>absolute</i> and not a matter of degrees (1 Cor. 1:30).	8. Can <i>increase</i> as believers grow in grace (1 Thess. 4:1-3).
9. Is solely by God's <i>grace</i> through faith (Rom. 3:24).	9. Is solely by God's <i>grace</i> through faith resulting in good works (Rom. 6:14).

f. Is James referring to justification before God or justification before men?

While not denying the reality of these believers' faith, nor demanding good works as the proof of initial "saving faith" as many falsely purport from this passage, James makes it clear that "faith by itself [instead of being accompanied by acts of love], if it does not have good works, is dead [or separated from its intended objective in second-tense salvation of profiting those in need]." This manifestation of good works stemming from a walk of faith and attitude of love is further communicated by another illustration.

But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." *Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*" (Jam. 2:18)

This verse underscores the impossibility of *demonstrating your faith to others apart from good works*. A person may have faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, and accurately proclaim this reality to others, but only as one lives or walks by faith, being a doer of the Word and not a hearer only, is one's faith demonstrated to others through acts of love or good works. This is why the Bible underscores the place of good works in the believer's life, not in order to be saved from Hell or to stay saved eternally, but because that believer has been saved from sin's penalty and is now learning to live daily by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit issuing out in beneficial works to others.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand that we *should* [desired result, but not guaranteed result] walk in them. (Eph. 2:10)

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appear-

ing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. (Titus 2:11-14)

This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God *should be careful to maintain good works*. These things are *good and profitable to men* [This sounds just like James 2]. (Titus 3:8)

Anticipating an objection to James's explanation in verses 14-18, we read in the next verse:

You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! (Jam. 2:19)

This verse has been sorely misunderstood by many. James's point regarding the demons in verse 19 is not that a failure to have good works means you have the same faith as a demon (dead or "non-saving faith" or "demon faith" as some claim). The fact is the demons actually do believe that God is one. This is a correct belief. This same monotheistic belief about God was held by Orthodox Judaism, yet this would obviously save no one since this is not faith in Jesus Christ as presented in the Gospel and demons do not believe the Gospel. Second, we know that salvation is not available to demons since Christ did not die for their sins. Third, James does not call the belief of the demons a mere "recognition" but he states they actually "believe." In fact, their faith does cause them to "tremble." James's point is that even the faith of demons results in some practical manifestation in their lives, so should not the genuine faith of these believers result in some profitable and demonstrable works toward other believers in need?

Furthermore, some people falsely teach from verse 19 that James is referring to an "intellectual faith" which does not manifest itself by action in the believer's life and is nothing more than a mental assent to the existence of God rather than

a saving faith. However, there is no such thing as an “intellectual faith” (sometimes referred to as “head faith”) versus a nonintellectual faith (sometimes referred to as “heart faith”). The reality and value of one’s initial faith for eternal salvation does not lie in it being manifested afterwards by action in the believer’s life but in the *Object* of faith. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). This is “saving faith” (though I don’t prefer this term because it sounds like the faith one exercises at salvation is different from everyday faith, instead of it being simply a *different object*).

Chiding this objector and his foolish objection, James goes on to state,

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead [or separated from its intended objective of benefitting others through acts of love to those in genuine need]? (Jam. 2:20)

Once again, James is not questioning the existence of these believers’ initial faith in Jesus Christ for justification from God but rather their failure to be doers of the Word by an ongoing faith demonstrated in profitable ways to others. (Remember James 1:22-27!)

Let’s trace James’s flow of thought and argument in the immediate passage:

- 1) A rhetorical question (2:14)
- 2) A practical scenario (2:15-16)
- 3) An initial conclusion (2:17)
- 4) An anticipated objection (2:18)
- 5) A personal challenge (2:19)
- 6) A second conclusion (2:20)

This leads to:

7) A first illustration – Abraham (2:21)

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? (Jam. 2:21)

James clearly states that Abraham was “justified by works.” But it is important to ask, “*Before whom* was Abraham justified according to James?” Is it justification (being declared righteous) *before God* or *before man* in this context? In keeping with the truth he has been declaring throughout this passage, the obvious answer is “Before others!” (Remember James 2:18, “Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”) The event that James highlights (offering Isaac upon the altar) was done many years *after* Abraham was justified by faith alone *before God*. Thus, the apostle Paul under the direction of the Holy Spirit writes,

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works [and he wasn’t], he has something to boast about, but *not before God*. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. (Rom. 4:1-3)

No one can be justified before God by their works, nor will any sinner be able to boast of their works in God’s presence. Abraham is used by the apostle Paul to illustrate that no one can be justified *before God* by good works (Rom. 4:1-8), religious rituals (Rom. 4:9-12), or the Mosaic Law (Rom. 4:13-16). James is not contradicting Paul, or vice versa, but they are explaining two aspects of justification. Paul addresses justification *before God* while James explains justification *before man*. So did Abraham have to wait all those years to see if he had the right, or enough, good works so he could claim he really had “saving faith”? Not at all, nor is that James’s point. But Abraham demonstrated his faith *to others* by offering his son, resulting in him being declared a righteous man (“justified”) *in the sight of other people*. Thus, James is not addressing “saving faith from sin’s penalty” (first tense) but “salvation from sin’s power,” which is not by faith *plus* works but by faith alone, which is then *manifested to others by good and godly works*.³

³ For further explanation of the distinction between justification before God vs. justification before men, see Dennis M. Rokser, “Can You Know

8) A principle highlighted (2:22)

Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? (Jam. 2:22)

Abraham's life and walk of faith in the Lord and God's promise was demonstrated by Abraham's godly works and maturity ("perfected") in this trial. Thus, the writer of Hebrews makes it clear,

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. (Heb. 11:17-19)

The question is not, "Did God see his faith?" since God knew all along what Abraham would do in this trial. Rather, the question was, "Do *you* see how his faith was demonstrated before man?" Perhaps you are wondering, "Who was on Mount Moriah to see Abraham's act of faith?" Besides his son Isaac, we don't know. But many people have heard and read about it. Consequently, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all esteem Abraham to be a righteous man because of this act of faith years after his justification before God.

But had Abraham not offered Isaac upon the altar as God commanded him, would this have been proof that he was never justified before God? Not at all, for that issue was settled many years before according to Genesis 15:6! And did Abraham know he was justified before God? Yes, without a doubt, for God had promised! But this act of faith in offering Isaac is a classic example of justification before men!

for Sure You Are Saved Forever?" in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Free Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 304-5; and *ibid.*, *Shall Never Perish Forever* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 150-51.

9) Two scriptural supports (2:23)

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. (Jam. 2:23)

It is imperative to observe that James quotes verbatim not only from Genesis 15:6 (regarding justification before God) but he also alludes specifically to Genesis 18 and the faith Abraham demonstrated regarding the promise of Isaac's birth. This was again justification before man. Thus Abraham is specifically called the friend of God later in the Old Testament in 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8.

10) A third conclusion (2:24)

You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. (Jam. 2:24)

By examining the context of this verse, observing the content of this passage, and comparing Scripture with Scripture, we can properly conclude that James is once again referring to justification *before man*. This occurs when a believer walks by faith, resulting in demonstrable and profitable works to others. Being declared righteous in the sight of men is by faith plus works.

11) A second illustration (2:25)

Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? (Jam. 2:25)

James is a master of illustrator throughout this epistle. Here he contrasts Abraham (a Jewish man who was a patriarch) and Rahab (a Gentile woman who was a prostitute). But what is James's point of comparison? It is Rahab's faith being demonstrated by good and profitable works. She had faith in the true and living God (in light of hearing of the Egyptian Exodus for-

ty years earlier) and she demonstrated her faith by hiding, at great risk to her own life, the Israeli reconnaissance team when they came to spy out Jericho. But keep in mind that she was already a believer *before* the spies came to Jericho. Her walk of faith (resulting in the profitable works of receiving and hiding the spies) was demonstrated *before men* (the spies) through this heroic act. But what undergirded her good works? Again, the writer of Hebrews underscores for us that it was her faith.

By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace. (Heb. 11:31)

12) A fourth conclusion (2:26)

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (Jam. 2:26)

James uses physical death and the reality that “the body without the spirit is dead” to drive home his point one last time that faith without works is a dead faith (separated from its intended purpose without denying its real existence). When James says, “so faith without works is dead,” he means that it is separated from its needed demonstration and profit to others. James is not stating that one’s works are needed to energize one’s faith, but that the believer’s walk of faith should manifest itself to others by good and profitable works. In walking by faith, believers give indication that they are enjoying salvation from the power or damaging effects of sin in their lives by being doers of the Word and not hearers only.

I think it is safe to conclude that the only way to arrive at the correct interpretation of James 2:14-26 is by carefully examining the *context* and *content* of this passage, and by *comparing Scripture with Scripture*, and by keeping in mind the biblical distinctions between the three tenses of salvation, salvation versus rewards, and justification before God versus other people. Unfortunately, most people (including Bible teachers) do not follow this approach and miss the point of James 2 and many other salvation passages.

A FINAL CONCLUSION

The entire epistle of James is written to believers in Christ who are part of the family of God (“brethren”). Does this describe you? Have you ever been born again through faith alone in Christ alone apart from your good works, religious rituals, and attempts at keeping the Law? This is how Abraham was justified before God and you can be too (Romans 4:1-5)! So then, how exactly does one become a child of God? Let me explain first of all what does NOT make you a child of God. You are not a child of God through:

- 1) *Water baptism* – This is a common misconception among religious people. But what do the Scriptures say?

But as many as *received Him*, to them He gave the right to become *children of God*, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13, emphasis added)

John makes it clear that you must receive Jesus Christ by believing in His name (which represents His person and finished work) to be born of God. No baptismal fount, lake, river, pool, baptistery, etc. can make one a child of God because only the blood of Jesus Christ and not physical water can wash away your sins (Rev.1:5).

- 2) *Asking or inviting Jesus into your heart* – This is a common misconception among many evangelicals today, yet ironically, this expression is NEVER found in the Bible. But what do the Scriptures say?

And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. (Gal. 4:6-7, emphasis added).

Jesus Christ comes into the believer's heart via the Holy Spirit AS A RESULT of becoming a son of God through faith in Christ alone as He is presented in the Gospel, NOT by asking Him in. Just a few verses earlier in the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul wrote,

For you are all *sons of God* through *faith in Christ Jesus*. (Gal. 3:26, emphasis added).

Think about it. If someone puts his faith in Jesus Christ who died for him and rose again, will he be saved from sin's penalty? Yes! (See Acts 16:31.) On the other hand, if someone asks Jesus into his heart but does not place his faith in Christ alone to get him to Heaven, is he saved? No! Could the sole condition of faith alone be any clearer?

- 3) *Giving your life to Christ* – This is another erroneous condition for salvation commonly heard among many professing “Christians.” But once again we must ask, where is this condition found in the Bible? What do the Scriptures say?

For God so loved the world that *He gave His only begotten Son*, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, emphasis added)

Does eternal life become your possession now and forever by you giving something to God? Or is it because God gave Someone for you? John 3:16 makes it abundantly clear that eternal salvation is not the result of you giving something to God (like your life) but results from God having given His Son to die on the cross for you and your sins.

who [Jesus Christ] gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. (Gal. 1:4, emphasis added)

who [Jesus Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. (Titus 2:14, emphasis added)

The truth of salvation being a gift from God is totally distorted if the unsaved sinner must be required to GIVE anything in order to obtain the gift of salvation offered freely by God's grace and RECEIVED through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

For the wages of sin is death, but *the gift of God is eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:23, emphasis added)

For by grace you *have been saved through faith*, and that not of yourselves; *it is the gift of God*, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Eph. 2:8-9, emphasis added)

So how exactly does one become a child of God? It is by being born again through personally receiving Jesus Christ by believing Who He is (God who became a man) and what He did for you (He died for your sins and rose again). To believe this is to believe the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4) of God's grace (Acts 20:24) or the good news of your salvation (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Eph. 1:13). The apostle John clearly states the same truth in the introduction to His Gospel:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

Have you ever personally received Jesus Christ as your Savior through a decision to place your faith in the only Savior that God the Father ever provided to die for your sins and be raised from the dead? It's not a matter of raising a hand, signing a card, coming forward, or praying a prayer. Right now you can choose to believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins

and rose again to save you and receive eternal life as a gift from God. If you have never placed your faith in Christ alone why not do so right now?

Behold, *now* is the accepted time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 6:2, emphasis added)

But if you are already a child of God, let me ask you the personal and penetrating question in keeping with James 2: “Are you letting God save you from the power of sin in your life so as to live a worthwhile life of faith that issues out in good works, benefits others, and brings glory to God?” Remember that the Christ life in phase 2 of salvation from sin’s power is lived the very same way that you received Jesus Christ – by faith!

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. (Col. 2:6-7)

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Heb. 11:6)

For we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Cor. 5:7)

If you are a believer in Christ, are you enjoying salvation from sin’s power so that you are becoming a doer of the Word and not a hearer only? Is your faith in Christ dead and separated from works of mercy and love toward others, especially other believers in need? Are you being justified before men by righteous works that emanate from your daily walk of faith in the

Lord and His promises, or is your testimony tarnished so that the lost around you would never declare you a righteous man because your faith is not being demonstrated in godly ways? To discern the point of this passage but not take it to heart means that James 1:22 directly applies to you, “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Believer, don’t waste your life in ongoing carnality by running down the dead-end streets of life, looking for meaning and happiness in all the wrong places. Instead, I encourage and exhort you to hear and heed the following appeals in light of God’s love and grace to you:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:1-2)

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2 Cor. 5:14-15)

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Dr. Dennis M. Rokser (M.Div., D.Min., Grace Biblical Seminary) has pastored Duluth Bible Church since 1985. The focus of his teaching has been the Gospel of God's grace as it relates to salvation, eternal security, the believer's identification/position in Christ, and living by grace through faith-resting in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.



All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. (2 Timothy 4:2-4)

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