

# The Epistle of James: Gracious Application of Unforgiving Law

**Key Text:** "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all."

**James 2:10**

## **In brief:**

"Faith is the *root* of salvation --works are the *fruit* of salvation. Faith is the *cause* of salvation --works are the *result* of salvation" (*Notes and Outlines on James*, J. Vernon McGee, p. 2).

Rightly dividing (properly *handling*) the Word of God (2 Tim 2:15b) greatly aids the Bible student to accurately understand and apply the Book of James. To begin at the wrong place (with incorrect understanding of who is James' audience and why he writes to them) only confuses the reader, reducing this book to a list a do's and don'ts --a futile attempt to carry over law's unforgiving requirements into the forgiven life of the church. At the beginning, the reader should understand this book *precedes* Paul's doctrinal teaching in Romans, contrasting law and grace.

All but a few commentators agree James was the first written of the 27 New Testament books. Written by the half-brother (by marriage) of Jesus, James' audience is not Gentile, but Jewish. And Jesus' brother's name is the Old Testament Ya'akov, or Jacob. It is important to understand the very Jewish nature of this book. (Later he is known as "James the Just.")

Perhaps none of Jesus' family perceived His divine nature prior to His resurrection. It was only after Jesus appeared to Ya'akov that he finally understood (1 Corinthians 15:7). This was a change necessary to legitimize James as the future leader of the Jerusalem congregation.

It is important to not dismiss the fact that James' audience is the Twelve Tribes of Israel --dispersed believing Jews --not Gentile believers. The error of Replacement Theology must be warned against. "Christ's Body is not Israel. Israel is not replaced" (by the church).<sup>1</sup> (Yes, today *most* are Gentile believers, based on the greater population of Gentiles. And *all* the Bible is for the edification of all. But not every word is *directed to* Gentiles! Right handling of the Bible requires we understand this distinction.) "There is no allusion to Gentile Christians in the epistle" (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, A. T. Robertson, p. 589.) "There are many indications in the epistle...that it is addressed primarily to Jews who are Christians" (*The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, John Wycliffe, p. 944.) Hence, the wise should ask *what else* is happening here!

For centuries, controversy followed this book. Martin Luther unwisely favored removing it from the canon(!). The book of James does not teach doctrine, as taught by the Apostle Paul. But it is not in contradiction with Paul's doctrine. James' Epistle is more akin to the book of Proverbs ---**lists of Do's and Don'ts, which collectively instruct in behavior boundaries and behavior goals that contribute to maturing our demonstrated faith.** Both Proverbs and James are meant to prick our conscience regarding our conduct. But an imagined contradiction is the controversy with James: Regarding James 2:12, ..."some Christians misuse this verse...." to proclaim they are "free from the law....from the supposed oppressive rules and regulations prescribed for Jews by the *Torah* of Moses. But [James teaches] precisely the opposite. Because the **Law is perfect**, it gives freedom. [Wow!] Only those who are rebels "seek to be free from rules and regulations; the wise understand that only within a framework of law is true freedom possible" (*Jewish New Testament Commentary*, David Stern, p. 727.)

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<sup>1</sup> "13 Distinctive Teachings of This Ministry", point 13, Paraclete Press Research Service, Inc., 2009  
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**This is KEY:** The book of James teaches that the *framework of law requires* works, even imperfect works; but those imperfect works are *valid only in the context of perfect grace*.

James, like Jesus, lived a strict Jewish lifestyle. "Acts 21:17-26 bears out the fact that James leaned heavily toward the Jewish law" (*Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, p. 718.) This tension is the major reason Bible students angst over whether we see a unified picture of justified faith demonstrated by works or whether these two present different pictures. They do not.

Further controversy tries to suggest a schism between the writings of James and Peter. Peter wrote mostly to Jews to the west. James wrote mostly to eastern Jews in Syria, Babylon and Mesopotamia. Hence, over time, western (Roman Catholic and anti-Semitic) thinking resisted what James wrote, even though his was also under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. **And James' assignment was to win these Jews to Christ. (Jews and Gentiles, in this age, are predominately taught by Paul.) Keeping this straight is necessary to keep the different writings of James, Paul and Peter in their unified message controlled by the Holy Spirit.**

*After* acknowledging these basics of right handling of God's Word, the **content of James can now be considered:** "Woven throughout the letter are two themes: persecution from outside the fellowship [because believing Jews were hated and resisted by unbelieving Jews], and problems within the fellowship. The believers were experiencing trials [from without], and James sought to encourage them. But there were also divisions and sins within the assembly, and James sought to help them confess and forsake their sins....These people needed to grow up in the Lord, and their various trails could help to mature them if they would obey God" (*Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, p. 719).

Following in Jesus' example, James' Epistle closely parallels the Sermon on the Mount. That Sermon, the Beatitudes, is the *spiritual explanation of Jewish Law*. And that law will not be fully operational until the Millennium, when all will live under the direct theocratic rule of Christ. Any adequate study course on James should include a comparison of James' Do's and Don'ts along with Christ's parallel teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Succinctly, "the purpose of this potent letter is to exhort early believers to Christian maturity and holiness of life." (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, p. 818.) While Paul's doctrines are about the inner saving of the soul, James' teaching is about outward serving based on inner faith.

**This is KEY:** *Only Christ sees the invisible saved soul. Man can only see the visible works as proof of that saved soul.*

"The Jewish people to whom James wrote had not ceased to practice their [law-based] religion, although they had embraced Jesus as Messiah. Many of them had partial understanding of the gospel [of grace]. In their enthusiasm at having found the true Messiah, they neglected the graces and virtues that should accompany faith in Christ. They taught that all that was necessary to have salvation was to believe that Jesus was the true Messiah and Savior. They were in great danger of being discouraged in their faith by the persecution of their own unbelieving country people" (*What the Bible is All About*, Henrietta Mears, p. 605.)

**The fullest application of James' Epistle is likely still future. Jews dispersed worldwide during the Tribulation will be brought to faith under the 144,000 Jewish Missionaries. Immediately they will see righteous works and witness for Christ taught in lawful context by fellow Jew, Ya'akov.**