

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE IV.

## DOCTRINE OF THE EPISTLE OF JAMES.

BY REV. EZRA P. GOULD, PROFESSOR IN NEWTON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

THIS Epistle is practical and ethical, with only one strictly doctrinal passage, but that one of great interest and importance. But, as might be expected in a discussion of Christian ethics, the references to Christian doctrine are scattered through the Epistle, though not so thickly as would be expected from a more speculative and discursive mind. We need not be reminded at this late day that these references to assumed doctrinal belief are as important and significant as the intentional development of doctrine. And on the same principle such references and implications in a writing so exclusively ethical are specially interesting.

Neither has the Epistle any general subject. It enforces certain duties and practical aspects of the Christian life, and without any attempt to give unity to the discussion. But its teachings, disconnected as they are, all belong to the one subject of the practical Christian life. We will take this, then, as our basis, and the first question suggested is the view of the author in regard to the

## ORIGIN OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

By this is meant the source of the Christian's moral state. If the other question of the saved state, the justification of the believer, is treated, it will be incidentally. In fact the question before us, though it forms our starting-point, is only incidentally answered in the Epistle. On this moral side, then, the Christian life has its source in regeneration (i. 18). In this passage the author of regeneration is said to be God. That which determines him to the act is his own will, by which we are probably to understand, from the nature

of the act itself, his independent will. The instrument which he employs is the word of truth. But in what way this instrument is employed is not stated here, any more than in the other New Testament passages teaching the same thing. The fact that the Christian life is regenerate is also plainly implied in those passages which speak of the law as a law of liberty (i. 25; ii. 12). For the *ἐλευθερία* describes the Christian state as one in which the believer obeys the law of God out of his own free will, not with the constraint which implies bondage. And James recognizes, also, the Christian philosophy underlying the necessity of regeneration, that like produces like, which of course makes a change from the old sinful state essential, and at the same time precludes its self-origination (iii. 12).

In regard to the previous moral state of the believer the Epistle teaches nothing directly, but the sinful character of that state is certainly implied in the doctrine of regeneration.

The second part of our general subject is the

#### NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN MORAL STATE.

Under this head the author teaches first that it is a mixed and not a simple state, sin and holiness being mingled in it. This is a fact really underlying the entire Epistle, the object of which is to warn the readers against certain sins to which they are subject, and which are inconsistent with the general, and especially with the normal, character of their lives. Its sinful side is taught directly in the statement, i. 14 and 15, about the origin of temptation in the Christian's own sinful desires; in the command to lay aside every uncleanness and abundance of wickedness, i. 21; in such specific charges of sin as ii. 6; iv. 1 sq., 16; and the statement, iii. 2, of the sinfulness in many respects of all believers; in the description of the tongue as an untamed evil, iii. 7 sq.; and in the command to confess sins to one another, v. 16.

But second, in spite of this admixture of sin, the predominant character of the Christian life is holy. The conflict between these opposing elements is not on equal terms.

This is the tone of the Epistle throughout. The exhortations and warnings are evidently addressed to men whose desires and tendencies, though often thwarted, are yet toward righteousness.

If we seek more particular proof of this, we shall find it, first, in the statement that this life originates in regeneration by God through the word of truth, which of course gives its own stamp to the life originated (i. 18). And the description of the law as a law of liberty, meaning that its commands are performed by the Christian freely, and not compulsorily, implies the same (i. 25 ; ii. 12). Moreover the author teaches distinctly that faith which is the distinguishing trait of the Christian, has its proper fruit in works of righteousness, and is proved living and genuine by them (ii. 14 sq.). And in v. 16, after exhorting his readers to pray for each other, he enforces it by the general statement of the effectiveness of the prayer of a righteous man.

Third, this Christian life is progressive, having for its goal the perfect fulfilling of the law. This is also confirmed by the general tone of the Epistle, which has for its object to secure in the readers this more complete conformity to God's will. The author begins by exhorting them to rejoice in temptations, or trials, because they contribute to this result, the right use of them tending to perfection and completeness. And a striking statement of the earnestness with which this result is desired by God is found in iv. 5, where he is said to desire the spirit which he caused to dwell in us to the extent that he is jealous of conflicting claims, and the writer therefore exhorts Christians to repentance and humility, but above all to the expulsion of opposing forces. That is to say, God has gained partial possession of the believer's soul, but with this he is not satisfied, and longs for complete possession.

In this unfolding of the twofold aspect of the Christian life we find, third, the author's

## DOCTRINE OF SIN.

That is, a general doctrine of sin is implied and developed in connection with the teaching of the Epistle as to the sin of believers. We have, first, the statement (i. 14 sq.) that sin has its root in the evil desires of the man, corresponding exactly to our Lord's teaching that it comes from the heart. As to external influence the Epistle teaches in reference to a particular class of sins, which may, however, be taken as representing all, that these evil desires are inflamed by hell (*γέεννα*) (iii. 6). And in accordance with the same the readers are warned to resist the devil (iv. 7). The objects on which these desires fasten, and which therefore furnish the occasion to sin, are found in the world, the love of which is enmity to God (iv. 4 sq.). And in this statement we find, too, the author's idea of the nature of sin, that its essence is in love of the world and in hatred to God. For this love of the world is in reality love of evil, according to the New Testament idea of the world. In regard to the relation between sin and knowledge James states, in a single passage, but very distinctly, the principle so essential to a right understanding of the New Testament doctrine of sin that it is sin to him who knows what is right, but does not do it (iv. 17).

Coming now to the other and predominant side of the Christian life, we find, fourth, the doctrine of the Epistle as to the

## NATURE OF CHRISTIAN HOLINESS.

We have seen that it originates in regeneration, effected by God through his word. The same agent and instrument are shown to be active in its maintenance and growth (i. 16, 21). In vs. 16 God is represented as the author not of temptation, but of every good and perfect gift; in which would be included specially the helps, as opposed to the hinderances, to holiness. And in vs. 21 the implanted word is said to be able to save their souls, i.e. as the passage goes on to state, through obedience. The agent in implanting the

word is evidently, as in vs. 18, God. In iii. 15 the wisdom that is pure, peaceable, full of good fruits, is from above. And in i. 5 the relation of wisdom to perfection is shown, and also our dependence on God for this wisdom. And finally, in the passage on justification (ii. 14 sq.; see especially vs. 18, 20, 22, 26), the underlying principle is evidently that genuine faith manifests itself in works — that it is a vital principle producing fruits of righteousness. But manifestly faith has no such power in itself, only as the medium through which is conveyed to the soul the divine grace.

In regard to the nature of this righteousness, the Epistle lays down the important principle of the necessity of consistency between the inward and the outward in Christian character. This is one of the central thoughts of the Epistle. Already, in the opening verses, the *δίψυχος*, the double-minded man, turned now this way and now that by conflicting desires, is represented as a specially repugnant type of character. And at the close of the first chapter we find the well-known and beautiful description of the true nature of religious worship or service as consisting in deeds of charity and in personal purity of character. This is contrasted with the semblance of worship, the ordinary outward form of religious service. That is, if we search for the underlying thought, the vital principle of worship is reverence toward God, which finds outward expression generally in what men call worship. This may exist, however, without the reverence; in which case it is a mere pretence; and thus the reality of the reverence which constitutes the true *θρησκεία* has to be tested by other things — by love to men and purity of personal character. The passage is, therefore, a protest against the outward unaccompanied by the inward, and, at the same time, a statement of the outward conduct which does form a test of the inward principle. The passage on the relation of faith and works (ii. 14 sq.) has the same key-note. Works are evidently, in the mind of James, the legitimate results of faith, and the only valid test of its existence. And the

reason that faith without works does not justify is the absence of this proof of the genuineness of the faith, which shows it to be a mere profession (see vs. 14, 18). Just so in iii. 13 sq., works are the manifestation of true wisdom and the test of its heavenly origin and character. In fact, the assumption of the Christian character of the readers runs through the entire Epistle; and they are therefore called on to show its proper fruit in their lives.

Taking, then, this twofold aspect of the Christian state, we find in regard to the inward side that it is represented as residing in the affections, and primarily in love to God. There is implied throughout the Epistle the reference to God in all Christian action, and the grounding of that action on our relations to him. It is his law that we are to obey, his righteousness that we are to fulfil, a religious service pure in his eyes that we are to perform, his example in our treatment of the poor that we are to follow, his friendship that we are to seek, his will in regard to the events of life to which we are to submit. But when the author wishes to express that comprehensive and fundamental quality which makes men heirs of God's kingdom, we find that he selects love to God (ii. 5). And in iv. 4 sq. he contrasts friendship with the world and love to God as the fundamental traits of sin and holiness. In the relations of the Christian to his fellow-men the author lays down the same great law of love, which he terms the royal law, *νόμον βασιλικόν*: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (ii. 8).

Besides this love of God and man, the two most prominent inner traits of the Christian character in the Epistle are meekness, or humility, and penitence. The recognition of man's dependence and of man's sinfulness, of his position as a creature and as a sinner, the rebuke of pride and self-exaltation, and the inculcation of all the humbler and gentler virtues, form one of the most distinctive, and certainly one of the finest, traits of Christianity; being fundamental alike in its morality and its doctrine. And their enforcement in this ethical book of the New Testament is a striking illustra-

tion of the unity and coherence of the Christian system, and of the subtile, deep harmony that pervades its writings. Among other passages under this head, see i. 5, enjoining prayer for needed wisdom ; iv. 6, in which God is represented as resisting the proud, but giving grace to the humble ; iv. 13, showing the necessity of recognizing our dependence on God in making our plans ; iv. 9, 10 ; v. 16, enjoining penitence and confession of sins.

When we come, now, to examine the outward side of the Christian life, we find the author's idea comprehensively stated as obedience to a perfect law (i. 22 sq.). All the law must be comprehended ; for it is a unit (ii. 10 sq.). The various duties included need not be mentioned particularly. It should be noticed, however, that the morality enjoined is that of the Sermon on the Mount, in both its spirituality and completeness ; in its commendation of humility and meekness ; in its insistence on obeying as opposed to hearing ; in its statement of the incompatibility of loving and serving both God and the world ; and in its injunction against swearing. And further, that the perfect law is moral, not ceremonial. To be sure, there is nothing said about this. But this silence is a presumption not for, but against, the inclusion of the ceremonial law in the *νόμος τέλειος* of James. For its enforcement would make this Epistle isolated among the New Testament writings. We leave out of this discussion altogether the question of inspiration and of the unity of doctrine among inspired men, and urge merely the natural improbability of such disagreement as this on other grounds. The author would have been in manifest opposition, for instance, to Peter, the apostle of the circumcision. For in Gal. ii. 11 sq. the charge of Paul against Peter was not that he did not hold the same opinion as himself in regard to circumcision and the other works of the law, but that he dissembled these opinions, and that he himself followed Jewish customs not from conviction, but from fear of the Jews. And the argument against him is based on the assumption that he himself lived *ἔθνικῶς*, Gentile-wise, but was compelling the

Gentiles, by his present hypocritical conduct, to Judaize. And Paul includes Peter with himself as believing that he was to be saved through faith alone, aside from all works of law.

Furthermore, there is good proof that James believed essentially the same. For he was associated with Peter and John in giving the hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas. This does not imply that Paul was teaching among the Gentiles, as applicable to their particular case, a gospel of liberty, which, however, would not apply to the case of the Jews, and that these representatives of the Jewish church allowed him to go his way, while they went theirs, each preaching a gospel suited to his own field. For the basis of their fellowship is evidently the essential unity of their teaching. Paul does not claim that he is teaching a gospel for the Gentiles, applicable to them because they are Gentiles, nor would he have allowed any such claim; but he claimed to preach a universal gospel, the same for both Jews and Gentiles. And when he afterwards yielded to the urgency of James and the rest at Jerusalem, and conformed publicly to Jewish customs, he certainly did not understand that such things were regarded by them as in any way essential. If he had, he would have refused compliance with their request, as he did in the case of Titus. Evidently, the only ground on which Paul complied at all with the ceremonial commands of the Jewish law, as in the circumcision of Titus, was that of national custom, not of religious requirement. And in this I see nothing at all to indicate that he did not occupy common ground with the other leaders, including certainly Peter and John, and probably James. Evidently, then, there is here a strong presumption to overcome in order to establish the inclusion of the ceremonial part of the law under the *νόμος τέλειος* of James. The silence of the Epistle on this point, in connection with the wide range of its moral specifications under the law, greatly strengthen this assumption.

The strongest objection to any such inclusion of the ceremonial commands under the term law in the Epistle how-

ever, remains yet to be noticed. Obedience to this law, as a whole, whatever is included in it, is to James of the utmost importance. On obedience to it in all its parts depends the Christian's final salvation. I do not mean by this perfect obedience, but obedience to a perfect law. We are certainly here at a very great remove from the spiritual religion of the New Testament, if a law on which so much depends is partly ritual. For it must be remembered that this makes the author occupy the ground, not of the Jewish, but of the Judaizing Christians. It is, as we have seen, not common to him with Peter, the apostle of the circumcision, and yet he is associated with Peter and John in their relations to Paul, implying substantial doctrinal accord. It is not meant, however, that James did not himself observe the ceremonial of the Jewish religion, and encourage such observance on the part of Jewish Christians; but that he considered this essential as a part of the perfect law by which men were to be judged, or of the works by which man is justified, there seems no reason to believe. And yet, this is the aspect in which the law is presented to us in the Epistle, and it is as a part of this law that, if at all, the ceremonial of the Jewish law finds place in it.

#### THE MOTIVES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

The Christian life has been considered as represented in the Epistle, with reference to its origin and nature. The only other aspect of it presented is that of its motives. There are two great classes of these used in the New Testament; one which seeks to influence the Christian by the consideration of what has been done for him, by gratitude and love, is not developed in the Epistle, except in the general exhortation to love God. In fact, the absence of all direct reference to the work of Christ in this or any other connection is very noticeable. But at the same time it is true that the Epistle presupposes this work, though its general subject does not strictly call for any mention of it. The other great class of motives drawn from the relation of the

Christian's character and conduct to his future state is the one constantly applied in the Epistle.

The two contrasted states of the future world are termed here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, life and death (i. 12; v. 20). The state of the righteous is also represented as inheritance in the kingdom prepared by God for them that love him (ii. 5). It is evident from the passage itself that the poverty mentioned is not the condition of membership in that kingdom, that being the love which characterizes those for whom it is prepared. But the statement is only that God selects its members out of the poor rather than the rich class, which is substantially the teaching of Christ on the same point. This state is also represented as a state of salvation (i. 21). These are familiar New Testament terms, used evidently in their ordinary sense, and do not need to be dwelt on here. But the use of the rewards and punishments of the future state to influence Christian conduct, making the former dependent on the latter instead of on the pure grace of God, does require careful examination. The author says that it is the man who is tested and approved by the endurance of temptation who will receive the crown of life (i. 12). The relation of this endurance to the love which is made the condition of the promise in the last part of the verse, is evidently that of the test. The endurance tests the genuineness of the love, for he that loves God keeps his commandments. In the last analysis it is obedience to this comprehensive and fundamental law of love which entitles the recipient to eternal life. See also ii. 5; i. 21, 22, where the doing of the word is said to be essential to salvation; and ii. 12, in which the judgment is said to be by the law of liberty. Thus the Epistle teaches certainly and prominently a doctrine of salvation by works.

But we should make a great mistake if we supposed that this is the only view presented. There is indeed a gracious side to this. For in the first place, as we have seen under another head, the new nature which is necessary to the performance of good works is the work of God, and that

too a work of begetting out of his own will. And even after this new creation the works are made dependent on his gracious help, so that humility is represented as one of the most characteristic traits of the Christian life. Moreover, the judgment which is to decide the future state is represented as a merciful judgment. Evidently, then, we are here on different ground from that of strict law. For here, on one side, representing man's need, we are confronted with a state of sin from which the man must be converted, and a multitude of sins needing to be covered; and, on the other side, representing God's action in this state of things, with regeneration and a judgment of mercy.

But not even now have we exhausted the statement of the doctrine of salvation in the Epistle. For in the passage on justification (ii. 14 sq.), while the author insists that faith alone does not save the man, it is equally clear that in his view neither do works alone save him. It is faith and works which, in any view of their connection, is a very different thing from salvation by works. In the beginning of the chapter this faith—the connection of the argument is such as to show that it is the same faith represented in vs. 14 sq. as saving—is denominated the faith of (as an objective genitive) our Lord Jesus Christ. Here, then, we have very important additions to the doctrine of salvation by works with which we started. Regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, a judgment of mercy, and faith in Jesus Christ as one of the factors in justification, take us a long way towards a distinctly Christian doctrine of salvation. But the question still remains, whether the doctrine of James is in harmony with the general New Testament doctrine. The clue that will lead us out of our difficulty as regards all the passages in question, except the one on justification, is to be found in the fact that James, except in that passage, is talking of final salvation, not of present justification. The motive to which he appeals is the judgment and its decisions. And when he represents that as a judgment of works, and bases salvation there on the deeds done in the body, he is simply stating the uni-

versal doctrine of the New Testament. The doctrine of Christ in the synoptic Gospels, see especially Matt. xxv. ; and in John (see v. 29 ; and of Paul even, see Rom. ii. 6 sq. ; 2 Cor. v. 10) is that of James, that the final judgment is of the deeds done in the body, whether they are good or evil. And this is the uniform description of the judgment. There is nothing to conflict with these statements. Absolutely, then, the only peculiarity of this Epistle in its treatment of this subject is the prominence given to the doctrine, which is itself the general New Testament view.

But when we consider its teaching, not in regard to final salvation, but to present justification, there is apparent discrepancy between this and New Testament, and especially Pauline, doctrine. For James says, faith without works does not justify. Paul says, faith, not works ; faith without works does justify. Now if we take these two statements by themselves, apart from their connection, they are capable of this explanation : Paul may be confining his attention to that act of the man which justifies, which he affirms to be faith alone ; while James may be speaking of the inseparable accompaniments, or fruits, of this faith, without which it could not exist, and of course could not justify. Out of these inseparable things Paul selects faith as that which justifies the man, while James asserts their inseparability. The key to the whole difficulty, on this supposition, is that there is no faith without works, on the one side, and of the two it is the faith that justifies, on the other. So that faith without works justifies, and faith without works does not justify. Paul, affirming the one, protests against legalism, and James, affirming the other, protests against antinomianism. They may, therefore, as far as these two statements go, occupy common ground. But do they thus agree ?

One thing is very certain : Paul sees and states both sides. He does not believe that faith can be found alone without works. The sixth and eighth chapters of Romans are as strong a protest against antinomianism as anything in the New Testament. His doctrine there is that faith joins us to not only a justifying, but also a sanctifying Saviour. And

the two offices being united in the same person, who is appropriated as a whole in the one act of faith, there can be, in Paul's view, no justification without sanctification, and so no faith without works. The only question is, whether James takes this broad ground, or whether his view is that there is a justifying power in works themselves, which would certainly put him in conflict with Paul, and, in fact, with the New Testament generally. Before proceeding to consider this, however, we must premise one thing: that what James says elsewhere about the bearing of works on our final salvation must not prejudice this matter. For the subject there treated is a distinct one, and his view of it is the general New Testament view; so that it cannot be made part of the argument to show his disagreement with the New Testament doctrine on this subject. For that it could do only if it was peculiar.

In considering the bearing of this passage on justification it is to be noticed, first, that the author does not consider faith to be genuine without works. His statement is guarded at this point. The supposition with which he starts is, that a man say that he has faith, but have not works. The question is not whether faith unaccompanied by works can save, but whether a professed faith without this accompaniment can save. He illustrates this by a profession of good will that does not manifest itself in deeds; and says that faith without works is equally dead, which is the same as to say that it is unreal; for life is the distinctive quality of a spiritual act or state like faith. And he proceeds further to state that the true proof of faith is works.

Second, this is the reason that faith does not justify without works, that the faith is unreal in such case. Works are not shown to us as an independent factor in the work of justification. The only influence which they are shown to have on the result is not in themselves, but through their bearing on the faith. The reason that faith alone does not justify is not that here is one of the things necessary to justification, but not the other, but that the absence of works invalidates the faith, and there is thus not the one thing necessary. The faith by itself is a mere profession, a dead thing. It is

thus the faith itself, one thing, which is perfected by the works, not the sum of two things, which is incomplete without either one or the other. For in Abraham's offering of Isaac, the Scripture that is said to be fulfilled is, that "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness." In itself, then, the absence of works is not represented as affecting the result, only as it makes the faith dead, and therefore inoperative.

Third, it is evident, then, that in this discussion faith and works are not co-ordinate things, but that the works are subordinate to the faith. Indeed it is not maintained by those who hold that there is here a real difference between Paul and James, that these are co-ordinate, a proposition that it would be difficult to maintain, but that the faith is subordinate, the works being the real condition of justification. They hold that faith is regarded by James as necessary to produce the really justifying works, which is of course exactly the reverse of Paul's position. According to this one teaches that faith justifies, but must be accompanied by its necessary result, works; while the other teaches that works justify, but must be accompanied by their only sufficient cause, faith. Whereas it seems evident that in the passage from James faith occupies no such subordinate position, but is required as, after all the principal thing, only needing the works to complete it and give to it life and genuineness.

If these positions can be maintained, and they certainly seem tenable, then James holds the ordinary New Testament doctrine of justification by faith, only emphasizing more and differently the necessity of the accompanying works.

There are only two other things remaining to be noticed in this statement of the doctrine of this Epistle, its theology proper, and its allusion to the second advent.

#### THEOLOGY.

Under this head there are only a few things worthy of special remark. First, that only the Father and Son are mentioned. The Holy Spirit is not once alluded to in the Epistle, which is the more remarkable in a discussion of the

practical Christian life. Furthermore, there is no statement of the relations between the Father and the Son, nor of the redemptive work of Christ; neither of which, however, is at all demanded by the subject. But the doctrine of Christ, as far as it is developed, is the same as in the other books of the New Testament. He is uniformly termed the Lord (see i. 1; ii. 1; v. 7, 9, 14 sq.) — a term also applied to God (see iii. 9; iv. 10, 15; v. 10, 11). Christ is also represented as the Judge (v. 9); and the healing of the sick and the forgiveness of sins are probably ascribed to him (v. 15). God is also frequently termed the Father; and the allusions to him are chiefly noticeable for the union of justice and mercy in the description of his character.

#### THE *παρουσία*.

As regards the coming of the Lord, it is used to comfort the Christians in their persecutions (v. 7-12). It is a time when the Lord will show his pity and tender mercy to his own (vs. 10, 11); when he will judge their enemies, but also themselves (vs. 9). As regards the time of this event, in whatever way we explain the *παρουσία* itself, that certainly seems to be represented as near. *ἤγγικε* is the verb used, meaning "has come near"; and in accordance with this is its use as a means of personal comfort and encouragement to the readers. A quite common explanation of the references to the *παρουσία* in the New Testament — that they announce its time as uncertain, so that it may be expected at any time — is certainly inadequate to explain the definite statement of its nearness in this passage.

But is it certain that the *παρουσία* uniformly denotes the final, second coming of the Lord? It certainly seems as if the defenders of such a view of inspiration as would exclude such a mistake as this expectation of the nearness of the *παρουσία* must extend the meaning of the term so as to include other typical comings of the Lord. But the whole subject is involved in the gravest complications, and is probably the most difficult problem in the whole range of biblical study to those who hold strict views of inspiration.