

Faith That Functions

James 2:14-26*

We must realize that in this passage James is not addressing the issue of the eternal destiny of his readership. Although this famous passage is often taken that way, this approach actually rips James's text out of the larger context in which it is found. It introduces into the text a concern which James did not have here at all, and ignores the fact that James regards his readers as his brothers and sisters and as born again, —present possessors of eternal life (1:18).

To get the subject wrong, of course, is to misunderstand James's entire text and to create a false theology about which James knew nothing at all. If this sounds to strong, it is not. The damage done to the Christian Church by an incorrect understanding of James 2:14-26 has been incalculable. It is also utterly deplorable because it betrays a superficial thought and study, not only of the passage itself, but also of the entire epistle. — Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James*, GES 1994. P.59

Danger of unproductive (*believing much & doing nothing*) faith (2:14-17)

The faith/works challenge & rebuttal (2:18-20)

Living faith is productive (*believing much & doing much*) faith (2:21-26)

2 exemplars

The Diatribe Literary Device:—New Testament examples

... the phrase, "But someone will say," contains a standard formula for introducing an objection. [The phrase] "You foolish man" [is] best understood as James's response to the objector, whose words carry through two verses (2:18-19). Convincing support for this conception is found in the similar biblical parallels in 1 Cor 15:36 and Rom 9:19 where the rebuttals commence with a rebuking identity strikingly parallel to Jas 2:20. For consistency, the NASB is used without its quotation marks for all the verses in the following chart:

	Jas 2:18-20	1 Cor 15:35-36	Rom 9:19-20
Introductory Formula	But someone may well say,	But someone will say,	You will say to me then,
Objector's Words	You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith with-out the works, and I will show you my faith by works. You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder.	How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?	Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?
Apostle's Response	But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?	You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies ...	On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?

As can be seen in the chart, in both of the Pauline texts the rejoinder to the imaginary objector begins with a pronouncement of the man's foolishness. But in James, the remark about the objector's folly comes at the beginning of verse 20, not in verse 18 or 19. This counterproposal to James encompasses all of 2:18-19. These parallel stylistic structures make it nearly impossible to take the text in any other way than that 2:18-19 is a complete unit the entire words of an opponent to James.

* These notes are prayerfully provided to aid, not replace, your personal study of God's Word.