

**James 2:12** In light of these things, keep on speaking or communicating and keep on applying just as those who are about to receive evaluation by the law of freedom.

**v. 13** Evaluation will be without mercy for the one not having shown mercy; grace in action exults over the Evaluation Tribunal. (EXT)

## Application of the Royal Law: James 2:14–26

**James 2:14** What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (NASB)

1. This is the most controversial paragraph in the Epistle of James and one of the most controversial in the New Testament. This controversy is almost totally caused by how it is translated in English Bibles.
2. The genesis of this paragraph goes back to verse 8 which is the first verse of the preceding paragraph. In verse 8, James's refers to the Lord's commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," as the Royal Law. Here's the expanded translation of that verse:

**James 2:8** If [ **protasis of a 1st-class condition** ] you apply the Royal Law according to the Scripture, "You shall unconditionally love from personal integrity those you encounter," [ **apodosis** ] honorably, you must keep on doing this. (EXT)

3. James then gives several illustrations of how the Royal Law is not applied. In verses 9–11, he references the partiality that the Chazzan showed Mr. Golden Fingers in verses 1 through 7 while showing disdain for the Poor Man.
4. James puts these Messianic Jews back in the context of the Mosaic Law reminding them of when they thought salvation could not be acquired unless they kept the whole law.
5. He reminded us of the Lord's conversation with the Rich Young Ruler which is recorded in Matthew 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22, and Luke 18:18–27. This man was confident he did not commit a number of overt sins the Lord mentioned, but he had committed mental-attitude sins in these areas.

(End JAS2-73. See JAS2-74 for continuation of study at p. 731.)

6. It is implicated by the Lord in Mark 7:9–13, that the young ruler had contributed all his wealth to the temple under the pledge of Corban thus violating the Fifth Commandment.
7. With these things in mind, the Jews of James’s congregation were to orient to grace by remembering that although they no longer functioned under the Mosaic Law they now functioned under the principle of free will.
8. The function of one’s volition in the Church Age is approached differently than previously in the dispensation of Israel. In the Old Testament, many Jews were guided by the mandates of the Mosaic Law, many erroneously assuming that keeping the Law resulted in salvation.
9. In the Church Age, believers function under the principle of grace which includes the principle of the Law of Freedom. Saved by grace, the believer is to grow in grace so he can apply doctrines of that dispensation.
10. Verses 12 and 13 draw an obvious conclusion from verses 8–11. Believers in the Church Age are commanded to grow in grace so they may, “prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22).
11. Therefore, the believer is to move forward as a good soldier for Christ by growing in grace. Failing to do this results in being a hearer of the word and not a doer.
12. This principle is forcefully stated in James 1:25 where the term Law of Freedom is first used:

**James 1:25** But the one who looks with an earnest desire to absorb in detail the perfect Law of Freedom, and continues to live in close proximity to it, not having become a forgetful hearer, but a doer, this man shall acquire unalloyed happiness by the production of divine good. (EXT)
13. The Law of Freedom makes reference to the principle: “In human history, the sovereignty of God and the free will of man coexist by divine decree.”
14. Therefore, believers may opt for intensified study of the Word of God which results in “not becoming a forgetful hearer, but a doer,” or on the other hand, they may be a “hearer, but not a doer.”
15. The subject that James now addresses is how to tell the difference between a doer of the word and a hearer only. James 2:14 looks at the situation from the standpoint of the unbeliever.

16. Verse 14 begins with an interrogative pronoun **τίς (tís)**: “What.” It introduces a principle that will stress the importance of the Word of God over works since no divine good can be produced unless it is based on divine guidance from Scripture and under the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.
17. The problem that results among unbelievers is their inability to recognize the difference between themselves and professing Christians. The reason is that all too often the believer is a hearer, but not a doer.
18. All the unbeliever can do is observe the lifestyle, behavior patterns, and character traits of others. All they are able to perceive is the production or lack of it of the believer.
19. When mainline Christianity stresses “good works,” but without teaching the doctrines that support them, a form of subtle legalism emerges. The biblical sequence is for the pastor to teach the doctrine which challenges members to first hear and then apply.
20. The end result among congregants is that some hear the Word and then apply while others are hearers only. It is this latter group that James is challenging in verse 14 because being a hearer only does not enable the unbeliever to distinguish that person from other unbelievers.
21. The next word in the text is the subject, the noun **ὄφελος (óphelos)**: “advantage, benefit, or profit.” This may be translated, “To what advantage.”
22. We know that unbelievers have no access to divine thought which is foolishness to them:

**1 Corinthians 2:14** But a natural man  
[ **unbeliever** ] does not accept the things of the  
Holy Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him;  
and he cannot understand them, because they are  
spiritually appraised. (NASB)

23. Believers must be constantly reminded of the status they once occupied. Like the person in this verse, he could not understand what believers were talking about when they discussed biblical principles.
24. He could clearly understand negative commandments, the “thou shalt nots,” but things unseen were a mystery to him. He could observe a believer not doing the “thou shalt nots,” but in an establishment oriented culture, even unbelievers obey many of those.

25. What unbelievers cannot see is the person's faith: faith alone for salvation and faith alone for spiritual growth. If they cannot "see" these things because believers in their periphery were not using, "faith in the Word for application to life and circumstances," then James asks, "What advantage is it?"
26. The unbeliever has no human spirit and cannot discern the difference between himself and other people except by observation through the eye and ear gates. What they see or hear, or in this context, what they do not see or hear, is how they determine the difference between themselves and members of the Royal Family of God.
27. The personality of the believer is reflected by his demeanor, mental attitude, and communication. His demeanor is not threatening, but confident. His mental attitude is positive, not negative. His communication is not judgmental, but flexible.
28. One does not need to quote chapters and verses to an unbeliever for he cannot understand biblical truth anyhow. However, principles of doctrinal truth have the power to confront human viewpoint without citing the Source.
29. Of course, this does not include personal evangelism which does require references to passages that distinguish Jesus Christ as the means by which one may choose to submit to acquire eternal life.
30. In this context, it is the application of doctrine to life and circumstances that enables the unbeliever to distinguish something different about Christians as compared to others he encounters.
31. Visible production from the source of inner faith will impress the unbeliever. He cannot see the inner source of faith, but he can see the application of it.
32. He cannot see the *kardia* and its stream of consciousness, he cannot see the doctrine stored therein, he cannot see the Holy Spirit's indwelling ministry, and from that resource he cannot see God's grace and His power.
33. Nevertheless, these attributes are most assuredly real and active in the soul of the Spirit-filled believer. Without application of these attributes, the unbeliever cannot distinguish a believer from an unbeliever.
34. So James poses the question, "What advantage is it, my fellow believers, if anyone "says": the present active subjunctive of **λέγω (légō)**. The present tense indicates the universality of this statement during the course of the Church Age.

35. This is not in quotes, but the phrase “anyone says,” indicates this is the attitude of the unbeliever. The active voice means the unbeliever thinks this while the subjunctive mood introduces a third class condition, maybe true, maybe not.
36. This is preceded by the particle **ἐάν (eán)**: “if,” plus the subjunctive of *légō* implying a third class condition. As far as the unbeliever is concerned, this is the way he sees life.
37. To try and restrict yourselves from association with unbelievers is unrealistic. There are numerous situations where it is actually impossible to avoid them such as a classroom, workplace, organization, recreation, and of course, family.
38. These gatherings are places for the believer to apply doctrine without necessarily quoting Scripture. These are environments for the application of the Christian way of life.
39. The verse reads so far, “What advantage is it, my fellow members of the royal family, if anyone says ....” This is followed by the present active infinitive of **ἔχω (échō)**: “to have” or “to have and hold, to possess.”
40. The unbeliever either thinks or comments, “He says he has faith.” The word “faith” is **πίστις (pístis)** and is the direct object of the verb *échō*, “to have.”
41. The noun *pístis* is transitive and therefore must have an object. It is the object that indicates in what the individual places his faith. In our context, it is obvious that the unbeliever is accusing a believer of having faith in something.
42. That “something” cannot be the gospel of salvation since the person has already been identified as a believer. So then, what is the object? The unbeliever does not actually know, but what he does observe is that the person does not produce works.
43. Well, we do know what the unbelieving observer has at least partially deduced and the answer is supplied by James in James 1:23: “he is a hearer of the word, but not a doer.”
44. “Not a doer” is the unbeliever’s assessment by the repetition of the verb *échō*, “to have,” however this time it is preceded by the adversative conjunction **δέ (dé)**: “but he has,” and followed by the negative conjunction, **μή (mē)**: “no.”

45. What this believer does not have, according to the unbelieving observer, is the direct object of *échō*, the plural noun, **ἔργον (*érgon*)**: “works or production,” which is accompanied by the negative *mē*, “no works or no production.”

46. Here is the expanded translation of James 2:14 so far:

**James 2:14** What advantage is it, my fellow members of the royal family, if any unbeliever says, “he has faith in the Bible, but he has no production [ **no application** ]”?

1. Now we arrive at a sentence in the English that, when taken at face value, has led many to conclude, if a person does not have works, then he is not saved. Nothing could be farther from the truth.
2. The verse concludes with a second rhetorical question, “Can that faith save him?” This question begins with the present active indicative of the verb **δύναμαι (*dúnamai*)**: “capability for doing something: “can, able, capable.”<sup>1</sup>
3. The question is directed to the believer’s faith which is the noun **πίστις (*pístis*)**. The verb form is **πιστεύω (*pisteúō*)**: “to believe, to have faith, to trust.” It and its noun form are transitive meaning this faith or belief must have an object.
4. Dependent on the context, the object with regard to the Christian way of life can be the gospel of Jesus Christ resulting in salvation, or it can be doctrine resident in the soul for application to life and circumstances.
5. James is not discussing salvation, but the issue among believers who have placed their faith in Christ for salvation. When it comes to production from their doctrinal inventory, they are negligent.
6. James’s illustration presents an unbeliever observing a believer who, as far as he can tell, is not much different than himself and most of the other unbelievers he knows.
7. What comes next is the word that seals the deal for those who think that production is necessary for salvation, the aorist active infinitive of **σώζω (*sōzō*)**: “to save.”
8. There are several applications of this verb in the New Testament. The one most often assumed is salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, but it is just one of the applications (Acts 16:31).

<sup>1</sup> Walter Bauer, “δύναμαι,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 261–62.

