

James 2 as Structural Judgment: The Exclusion of Belief, Intent, and Identity from the Salvation Equation — Faith Without Works as Categorical Exclusion Operator

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Abstract

This study develops James 2 as the specification of a categorical exclusion operator within the soteriological framework established by Matthew 25, John 9, and 2 Thessalonians 2.

Body

James 2 as Structural Judgment: The Exclusion of Belief, Intent, and Identity from the Salvation Equation

Faith Without Works as Categorical Exclusion Operator

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Abstract

This study develops James 2 as the specification of a **categorical exclusion operator** within the soteriological framework established by Matthew 25, John 9, and 2 Thessalonians 2. Where Matthew 25 establishes the judgment criterion (Ψ_V under friction), John 9 specifies the entry mechanism into delusion (—claim foreclosure), and 2 Thessalonians 2 describes the terminal state (—state), James 2 performs a distinct and necessary function: it **excludes belief (B), intent (I), and identity (ID) from the salvation equation**.

James 2 has been misread for centuries as a moral correction of Paul or a balance between “faith” and “works.” This reading argues that James 2 is neither. It is an **exclusion filter** — a formal specification of what cannot count as righteousness under any circumstance. Drawing on the scholarship of Luke Timothy Johnson, Scot McKnight, and recent work on James’s relationship to the Jesus tradition, I demonstrate that James addresses not pagans or obvious oppressors but **believing communities who already think they are righteous**. This aligns James structurally with Matthew 25’s “Lord, Lord” speakers and John 9’s “We see” authorities.

The formal logic is precise: $x: (B \mid I \mid ID) \rightarrow \text{righteousness}$. Only enacted response to concrete need (W) under friction is evaluable. James is not adding works to faith. James is **removing excuses**.

Keywords: James 2, faith and works, exclusion operator, structural soteriology, Ψ_V formalism, categorical judgment, partiality, identity-lock, salvation equation

I. Introduction: Why James 2 Is Not About Moralism

James 2 has been misread for centuries because it is not what it appears to be.

It is not:

- A moral correction of Paul
- A balance between “faith” and “works”
- An exhortation to be better Christians
- A proof-text for works-righteousness

It is something far sharper:

James 2 is a categorical exclusion operator. It specifies what cannot count as righteousness under any circumstance.

Matthew 25 tells us what will be judged. John 9 tells us how testimony is expelled. James 2 tells us **which defenses are inadmissible**.

This is why James is unbearable to ideological systems. It forecloses the defenses they depend on.

II. Scholarly Context: The Luther Problem and Beyond

II.1 Luther’s Rejection

Martin Luther famously called James “an epistle of straw” (*eine recht stroherne Epistel*), finding it incompatible with his understanding of Pauline justification by faith.¹ Luther’s rejection set the terms for centuries of Protestant-Catholic debate about the relationship between faith and works.

But Luther’s reading, however influential, misidentifies the genre. He reads James as a theological treatise competing with Paul. James is not a treatise. It is **paraenesis** — practical wisdom addressed to communities under pressure.² #

II.2 Contemporary Scholarship

Luke Timothy Johnson’s commentary emphasizes James’s rootedness in the Jesus tradition, particularly the Sermon on the Mount.³ The echoes are structural: both Jesus and James address communities that claim

¹Martin Luther, “Preface to the New Testament” (1522), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 362.

²Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Anchor Bible 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 16-26.

³Johnson, *Letter of James*, 47-64.

righteousness while enacting partiality.

Scot McKnight reads James as “a Christian adaptation of Jewish wisdom,” focused on “social embodiment of faith.”⁴ The key insight is that James addresses **insiders** — people who already believe they are part of the saved community.

Richard Bauckham notes that James 2:1-13 and 2:14-26 form a unified argument about the **social test of faith**.⁵ Partiality (2:1-13) and faith-without-works (2:14-26) are not separate topics; they are the same failure examined from different angles. #

II.3 The Structural Reading

This study extends these insights by formalizing James 2 as an **operator** within the soteriological framework. James is not arguing with Paul about the mechanism of salvation. James is specifying what **cannot function as evidence** in the judgment Matthew 25 describes.

III. The Audience: Believing Communities Who Think They Are Righteous

III.1 Not Outsiders

James is not addressing:

- Pagans
- Obvious sinners
- Those who reject the faith

He is addressing “**my brothers and sisters**” (, 2:1, 14) — members of the believing community.

This is crucial. James 2 is an **internal critique**. It addresses people who already claim faith, already identify as righteous, already believe they are on the right side. #

III.2 Alignment with Matthew 25 and John 9

This aligns James structurally with:

- **Matthew 25’s “Lord, Lord” speakers:** Those who claim relationship with Christ but are unknown to him (Matt 7:21-23; 25:44)
- **John 9’s “We see” authorities:** Those who claim sight while demonstrating blindness

James, Matthew 25, and John 9 all address the same population: **those whose self-concept of righteousness prevents them from recognizing their actual condition.**

⁴Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 1-15.

⁵Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999), 163-185.

IV. The Core Move: Faith Is Not a Proxy

IV.1 The Text

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can that faith save them?” (James 2:14)

The Greek is surgical:

- — claims to have faith
- — does not have works
- ; — is that faith able to save?

Note the verb: — *claims*. James is not asking whether they have faith. He is asking whether their **claim** to have faith functions as evidence. #

IV.2 The Logical Structure

James is not arguing:

Faith + Works = Salvation

He is arguing:

Faith-claim → Salvation

Only enacted response under friction is evaluable

The logic is **exclusionary**, not additive. James is not adding works to faith. He is denying faith’s causal power as a variable in the equation. #

IV.3 The Formal Specification

Let:

- B = belief / faith state
- I = intent / interior disposition
- ID = identity / category membership
- W = enacted response to concrete need
- Ψ_V = regard under friction (from Matthew 25)

James’s claim:

x: (B I ID) → righteousness

Only: W under friction → evaluable

This is the **exclusion operator**: B, I, and ID are formally excluded from the salvation equation.

V. The Poor Person Test (Anti-Ideology)

V.1 The Text

“If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?” (James 2:15-16)

This is the **concrete test**. The scenario is deliberately specific:

- A community member (brother or sister)
- Material lack (naked, hungry)
- Verbal response without material response (“Go in peace”)

V.2 The Structure of the Failure

The failure is not:

- Lack of compassion (they express care: “keep warm and eat your fill”)
- Lack of relationship (they are community members)
- Lack of faith (the context assumes shared belief)

The failure is: **verbal response substitutes for material response**.

Words function as a proxy for action. The speaker experiences themselves as having responded — they offered good wishes, they acknowledged the need, they maintained relational warmth. But the need remains unmet. #

V.3 The Anti-Ideology Function

This test is **anti-ideological** because it cannot be satisfied by:

- Correct beliefs about poverty
- Good intentions toward the poor
- Identity as someone who cares about justice
- Membership in communities committed to the poor

It can only be satisfied by **supplying bodily needs**.

The test strips away everything except enacted response. This is why James is unbearable to ideological systems: it refuses the substitutes they depend on.

VI. Demons Believe: The End of Identity Innocence

VI.1 The Text

“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” (James 2:19)

This sentence annihilates **identity-based moral exemption**. #

VI.2 The Logical Structure

The argument:

- Correct belief (monotheism) is shared by demons
- Demons are paradigmatically damned
- Therefore correct belief does not distinguish saved from damned
- Therefore correct belief is not probative

The phrase “**and shudder**” () is important. The demons do not merely intellectually assent; they have appropriate emotional response. They recognize the truth they believe. They are terrified by it.

Even appropriate emotional response to correct belief does not count. #

VI.3 The Formal Exclusion

If $B(x) = B(\text{demons})$ and $\text{demons} \rightarrow \text{DAMNED}$ Then $B(x) \rightarrow x \rightarrow \text{SAVED}$ Therefore B is not probative

James extends this implicitly to I (intent) and ID (identity):

- Intent without enactment is like saying “keep warm” without providing clothing
- Identity (“we are disciples of Moses,” cf. John 9:28) without enacted regard is equally empty

VII. Faith Without Works Is Dead: Non-Operational, Not Evil

VII.1 The Text

“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:17)

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” (James 2:26)

VII.2 The Meaning of “Dead”

The term (dead) is crucial. James does not say faith without works is:

- Evil ()

- False ()
- Sinful ()

He says it is **dead** — non-functional, inoperative, unable to produce effects.

This is not moral condemnation. It is **operational diagnosis**. #

VII.3 The Formal Specification

A bridge that collapses under load is not sinful. It is non-functional.

Faith-without-works Non-operational faith Non-operational faith Salvation Therefore: Faith-without-works Salvation

James is performing **stress-testing**, not shaming. He is identifying what fails under load.

VIII. Partiality as Structural Failure

VIII.1 The Text

“My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or, ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:1-4)

VIII.2 Partiality as Categorical Sorting

The Greek (acts of favoritism/partiality) literally means “receiving faces” — responding to surface presentation rather than to the person.

This is **Γ-application** in the Matthew 25 formalism: categorical sorting based on external markers rather than regard-under-friction. #

VIII.3 The Connection to Faith-Without-Works

James 2:1-13 (partiality) and 2:14-26 (faith-without-works) are not separate topics. They are the same failure:

- **Partiality**: Sorting persons by category (rich/poor) rather than regarding them
- **Faith-without-works**: Substituting category-membership (believer) for enacted response

Both are forms of **categorical collapse** — $\Psi_V = 0$ in the Matthew 25 formalism.

IX. Operator Formalization

IX.1 The Exclusion Operator (E)

James 2 specifies the **Exclusion Operator**:

E: {B, I, ID} → (excluded from evaluation)

Where: B = belief state I = intent / interior disposition ID = identity / category membership

E(B) = : Belief is not probative E(I) = : Intent is not probative E(ID) = : Identity is not probative

IX.2 The Evaluable Remainder

After exclusion, what remains evaluable is:

W = enacted response to concrete need under friction

Evaluable: $\Psi_V(W)$ — regard measured through enacted response

IX.3 The Identity-Lock Operator

James also specifies the **Identity-Lock** — the mechanism by which ID prevents recognition of failure:

If ID = “believer” is treated as sufficient Then W is not tested Then $\Psi_V = 0$ is not detectable Then correction is foreclosed

This connects James to John 9’s —claim: identity-as-believer functions like claimed-sight to foreclose the test.

X. Integration: The Four-Pillar Framework

X.1 James 2’s Position

Pillar Text Question Operator

I. Judgment Matthew 25 What counts? Ψ_V test

II. Exclusion James 2 What doesn’t count? E: {B, I, ID} →

III. Entry John 9 What prevents correction? —foreclosure

IV. Terminus 2 Thess 2 What completes collapse? —state

X.2 The Logical Dependency

James 2 is logically **prior** to the other pillars in the sense that it specifies what is inadmissible:

- Matthew 25's judgment cannot be evaded by B, I, or ID claims
- John 9's -claim (identity as "those who see") is already excluded by James
- 2 Thessalonians 2's -state is the terminal condition when ID has fully replaced W

X.3 The Trajectory with James

James 2 Exclusion (B, I, ID inadmissible) $\downarrow \downarrow$ (defenses foreclosed) $\downarrow$ John 9 Entry $\rightarrow$ 2 Thessalonians
 2 Terminus (-claim) (-state completion) $\downarrow$ Matthew 25 Judgment (Ψ_V test
 administered)

XI. Contemporary Application

XI.1 The Anti-Racist Identity Test

James 2 directly addresses the contemporary phenomenon where **anti-racist identity** substitutes for anti-racist enactment:

ID = "anti-racist" + B = correct beliefs about racism + I = good intentions regarding race Righteousness

Only W = enacted response to racialized harm $\rightarrow$ evaluable

The identity-claim "I am anti-racist" is precisely what James excludes. The question is not "Do you identify as anti-racist?" but "Did you supply the bodily needs?" #

XI.2 The Progressive Self-Concept Test

Similarly for progressive self-concept:

ID = "progressive" + B = correct beliefs about justice + I = good intentions regarding equity Righteousness

Only W = enacted response to concrete need $\rightarrow$ evaluable

James refuses the substitution of correct belief for enacted response. #

XI.3 The Therapeutic Language Trap

The contemporary use of therapeutic language ("harm," "safety," "boundaries") can function as B/I/ID substitution:

- "I care about your wellbeing" (I) without providing support (W)
- "I am a safe person" (ID) without enacted safety (W)

- “I believe in boundaries” (B) without respecting them (W)

James identifies this structure as **dead faith** — words that perform care without enacting it.

XII. Objections and Responses

XII.1 The Paul Contradiction

Objection: James contradicts Paul’s teaching on justification by faith (Romans 3:28, Galatians 2:16).

Response: James and Paul address different questions. Paul asks: “On what basis does God accept us?” (Answer: grace through faith, not works of the law). James asks: “What evidence demonstrates genuine faith?” (Answer: enacted response, not belief-claim). They are not in contradiction because they operate at different logical levels. Paul excludes works-of-law from the mechanism of justification; James excludes faith-claim from the evidence of justification.⁶ #

XII.2 The Works-Righteousness Objection

Objection: This reading reinstates works-righteousness.

Response: James does not claim that works **earn** salvation. He claims that faith-claims without works **do not demonstrate** salvation. The distinction is between mechanism (how salvation occurs) and evidence (how salvation is recognized). James addresses evidence, not mechanism. #

XII.3 The Rigor Objection

Objection: This reading is too rigorous — it excludes everything except enacted response.

Response: Correct. James is rigorous. He is performing stress-testing. The question is not whether this is comfortable but whether it is accurate. The test is: does a faith that never enacts response to concrete need function as saving faith? James says no. The rigor is the point.

XIII. The Ethical Remainder

XIII.1 What James Does Not Authorize

James does not authorize:

- Judgmentalism toward those who struggle to enact
- Dismissal of belief, intent, or identity as meaningless
- Works-righteousness in the sense of earning salvation
- Quantification of sufficient works

⁶For a detailed treatment of the James-Paul relationship, see Johnson, *Letter of James*, 58-64, and McKnight, *Letter of James*, 232-261.

XIII.2 What James Requires

James requires:

- Honesty about the gap between claim and enactment
- Refusal to substitute belief for response
- Testing of faith under friction (the poor person test)
- Recognition that B, I, and ID are not probative

XIII.3 The Frailty Exception

The Matthew 25 framework includes $\Psi_V =$ (frailty exception) for those who lack capacity to enact response. James's exclusion operator does not eliminate this exception. The question is not ability but **substitution** — using B, I, or ID as replacement for W when W is possible.

XIV. Conclusion: The Exclusion Filter

James 2 completes the soteriological operator framework by specifying the **exclusion filter**:

Belief, intent, and identity are not probative. Only enacted response to concrete need under friction is evaluable.

This is not moralism. It is operator specification.

James addresses believing communities who think they are righteous — the same population addressed by Matthew 25's judgment and John 9's witness punishment. He tells them: your faith-claim, your good intentions, your identity as believers — none of these function as evidence. Only what you do when confronted with concrete need.

Demons believe and shudder. Faith without works is dead. The body without spirit is dead.

The exclusion is complete. The defenses are inadmissible.

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Notes

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Cross-References

Document Relation

Mathematics of Salvation (Matthew 25) Parent framework: Ψ_V formalism

John 9: Witness Punishment Mechanism Sister text: entry mechanism

2 Thessalonians 2: FOS Operator Sister text: terminal state

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