

JAMES 2:1—COMMAND OR QUESTION?
An Examination of the Grammatical Ambiguity
in Translating James 2:1, the Exegetical Significance
of Each Translation Option, and the Context of the
Passage as the Determining Factor in Translation

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James 2:1—Command or Question?¹

When it comes to the difficulty of interpreting James chapter 2, the second half of the chapter (vv. 14-26) gets all the attention. Here is the oft-perplexing passage about the relationship between faith and works. Here it is that James contradicts Paul's assertion that justification is by faith alone...or did he? Here we find the confusing dialogue between James and the imaginary objector. Just where should we put those end quotes? This paper will address a perplexing point of interpretation, indeed of translation, from the first part of the chapter. It will seek to answer the question, "Is verse one a command or a question?" The different options lead to widely divergent conclusions.

The Issue

In the Greek, James 2:1 reads:

Ἀδελφοί μου, μὴ ἐν προσωπολημψίαις ἔχετε τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης.

The *crux interpretum* of the verse is the verb ἔχετε ("have"). This verb-form by itself is equivocal, for it can denote either the indicative or the imperative² of ἔχω ("I have," "I hold," "I possess").³ In the first instance, an essentially literal translation would be:

My brothers, do not have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with favoritism.

According to this translation (the command option), which takes ἔχετε as an imperative verb, James is commanding his readers not to hold, or possess, their faith in Jesus in a certain way, namely with favoritism.⁴ The second possible translation is:

My brothers, can you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with favoritism?

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Fred Chay for alerting me to the translation issue in James 2:1 and for his encouragement to write this paper. Additionally, his feedback was very helpful in making the paper better.

² Very generally speaking a verb in the indicative mood is used to express a perceived actuality from the point of view of the speaker/writer, and a verb in the imperative mood expresses a command or request.

³ The complete parsing is either the present active indicative 2nd person plural or present active imperative 2nd person plural.

⁴ The prepositional phrase ἐν προσωπολημψίαις is best taken as a dative of manner. It's presence between the negative particle μὴ and the verb indicates its close connection to the verb, in which capacity it acts adverbially.

According to this translation (the question option), which takes ἔχετε as an indicative verb, James is asking a rhetorical question with the presumed answer being “No. It is not possible to hold, or possess, faith with favoritism.” An explanation of why μή (“not”) + indicative can be translated as a question is given below.⁵

A Survey of the Various Bible Versions

The majority of Bible versions translate the verse as a command. Below are some of the various treatments of the verse with comments on each translation.

New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of* personal favoritism.

The personal pronoun “your” is not in the Greek and is thus added by the translators, along with the phrase “an attitude of.” The verb προσωπολημπτέω (“show favoritism”) is an idiom, which literally means, “to accept a face.” This allows for the translation of the noun form as “personal favoritism.” The verb ἔχετε (“hold”) is translated as an imperative.

King James Version

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Lord* of glory, with respect of persons.

Like the New American Standard, the King James Version translates the verb into an imperative in English (“have not”), and the prepositional phrase “with respect of persons” is taken adverbially denoting manner. Of the versions listed, the New American Standard and the King James Version give the most literal, word-for-word translations.

English Standard Version

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

The ESV translators have supplied a verb that is not in the Greek. In fact, they have converted the prepositional phrase “with partiality” into a verbal idea, “show

⁵ The primary concern of this paper is whether ἔχετε is indicative or imperative. Other grammatical/syntactical issues in the verse will not be discussed, such as whether τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is an objective or subjective genitive (“faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” or “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ). For a look into the debate surrounding this issue, I recommend *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* edited by Michael Bird and Preston Sprinkle (Hendrickson, 2009).

partiality.” In addition, they have reduced the only verb in the Greek sentence (“hold”) to a secondary verb modifying temporally their supplied verb. Thus, they treat ἔχετε as something that it definitively is not, a participle. However, this translation does convey an imperatival force.

The New International Version

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

Like the previous translation, this version treats the prepositional phrase as a verb. Furthermore, it transforms the imperatival clause “hold the faith” into the noun “believers.” Still, the translation retains the imperatival force of the original.

The NET Bible

My brothers and sisters, do not show prejudice if you possess faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, the prepositional phrase “with partiality” is translated as a verb (“do not show partiality”). In fact, the NET Bible transforms the prepositional phrase into the apodosis of a conditional statement, and the verb ἔχετε is rendered as the protasis (“IF you possess faith..., THEN do not show prejudice.”). It is hard to understand how this has been done. First of all, the prepositional phrase is so closely linked to the verb in the Greek construction (μὴ ἐν προσωπολημψίαις ἔχετε → negative particle + prepositional phrase + verb), that to separate it out and make it a grammatically independent⁶ verbal idea does undue violence to the syntax. Secondly, while the indicative mood can be used to express conditionality, such conditionality is expressed explicitly with a conditional particle, such as εἰ (“if”). Dan Wallace does not list the indicative as an option to convey an implicit condition (i.e. without a formal structural marker).⁷ Interestingly, the NET Bible provides a footnote to their translation stating that the Greek reads, “do not have faith with personal prejudice.” No explanation is provided for how the conditional translation was settled upon.

*The New Revised Standard Version*⁸

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 684. “The apodosis is *grammatically independent, but semantically dependent*” (italics original).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 687-689.

⁸ The Revised Standard Version (not listed above) is identical to the ESV with the exception of rendering τοῦ κυρίου as a subjective genitive (“of the Lord”). Cf. footnote 5. The ESV translates it as an objective genitive (“in the Lord”). The closeness of the translations is accounted for by the fact that the ESV translation committee used the 1971 edition of the RSV as its base text. Thus, the ESV serves as a revision to the RSV.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

This translation employs the question option. As noted above, this is a possible way to render the verse. The translators have maximized the force of the rhetorical question, which presupposes a negative response. Instead of opting for the straightforward “can you have faith?” they have gone with “do you really believe?”

As can be seen from the above translations, this verse has been mostly translated with an imperatival force. Only the New Revised Standard Version treats it as a question. However, the NET Bible’s translation denotes a conditional element, which subtly raises the question of whether the readers possess faith.⁹

At this point it is interesting to note that two ancient translations of the Greek New Testament support the imperative translation. The Latin Vulgate reads *nolite in personarum acceptione habere* which reads literally “be unwilling to have with respect of persons.” The construction is a negative imperative (*nolite* “be unwilling”) plus an infinitive (*habere* “to have”). The Syriac Peshitta reads *lʹ bmsb bʹpʹ thwwn ʹhydyn* which reads literally “may you not be one who holds with acceptance of face.” The negative particle *lʹ* plus the peal¹⁰ imperfect *thwwn* combine to form a volitional nuance (“may you not be”). To this is added the peal participle *ʹhydyn* (“one who holds”).

The Two Valid Options

Of the modern translations above, the New American Standard and the King James Version do the best at translating the Greek essentially literally and word-for-word. The other translations have strayed from the original wording in varying degrees.

As already mentioned, the two valid options for translating James 2:1 are as a command or as a rhetorical question presuming a negative answer. The command option is self-explanatory and readily understood. However, the rhetorical question translation needs some explanation.

⁹ If it is possible to see a conditional element in the verse, which I contend on a grammatical and syntactical basis it is not, some may argue that the statement could be taken as a first class conditional. The first class condition assumes the truth of the protasis for the sake of argument (“If you possess faith, and let’s assume that you do,...then do not show prejudice.”). However, as Wallace points out, this should not be overstated as “Since you possess faith...” The first class condition does not always correspond to reality. Thus, the NET Bible translation contains a subtle question of the reality of the readers’ faith. See Wallace, 690-691.

¹⁰ The Syriac peal verb stem corresponds to the Hebrew qal stem. These are the simplest verb stems in each language.

According to Dan Wallace, the indicative can frequently be used to ask a question. “The question *expects an assertion* to be made; it expects a declarative indicative in the answer” (italics original).¹¹ James frequently uses the interrogative indicative in a negative form for rhetorical effect, especially in chapter 2 (cf. 2:4, 5, 6, 7, 14, 21, 25; 3:11, 12; 4:4).

There are two ways to negate a verb in the indicative mood when it is used interrogatively.¹² First, when the presumed answer is “no,” μή is used to negate the verb.¹³ For example, in 2:14b James asks, “That faith is not able to save him, is it?” (my translation), which in the Greek is μή δύναται ἡ πίστις σῶσαι αὐτόν; (δύναται “it is able” is in the indicative mood and is negated by μή “not”).

The second way to negate an interrogative indicative is with the negative particle οὐ. This construction is used when the anticipated answer is “yes.” For example, in 2:4 James asks, “have not distinctions been made among you?” which in the Greek is οὐ διεκρίθητε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς (διεκρίθητε “you have made distinctions” is in the indicative mood and is negated by οὐ).

With this understanding, we can see that if ἔχετε in 2:1 is indicative in mood, the verse is asking a rhetorical question and presuming a negative answer (“My brothers, you cannot hold/possess faith with partiality..., can you?” Presumed answer: “No.”).

The Implications of Each Option

If James intended for 2:1 to be a rhetorical question presuming a negative response, there are two possible ways to take the question. James may be saying that his readers do indeed possess faith in Jesus, thus it is impossible for them to show partiality. It is hard to see how verses 2-13 can follow such an assertion. As Scot McKnight puts it, “The interrogative [taken this way] does not make logical sense, for why would James deny that they are showing partiality only to explain specific instances of partiality?”¹⁴

There is another way of taking the question, which removes the logical absurdity that McKnight points out. James may be saying that a person cannot possess faith in Christ with partiality. James Hardy Ropes acknowledges that “[t]he question, ‘Do ye, in accepting persons, hold the faith of our Lord?’ would express

¹¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 449.

¹² Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert Walter Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 220

¹³ Dan Wallace, in his *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, does not discuss the μή + present indicative construction. His discussion of the interrogative indicative is without any comment on how they are negated. See below.

¹⁴ Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 174.

doubt whether a faith accompanied by this fault is true faith in Jesus Christ at all.”¹⁵ According to this understanding of the verse, verses 2-13 apply to people who say they have faith in Christ, but really they do not. Furthermore, this translation would provide support for understanding 2:14-26 as arguing that faith without works is dead in the sense that it is not genuine (i.e. spurious) faith and thus not saving faith.

On the other hand, if James intended for 2:1 to be taken as an imperative, we can say that he considered it possible for believers to possess faith in Christ and show partiality simultaneously. In this understanding of 2:1, verses 2-13 are addressed to believers. It is possible for believers to have evil motives (v. 4), to commit sin, to be convicted as transgressors of the law of love (vv. 8-9), and to be prone to merciless judgment (v. 13). A further point of interpretation arises upon the assumption that believers can show partiality, albeit inconsistently with their profession of faith: Is James’ hortatory command in 2:1 given out of a concern that his readers’ failure to be doers of the word will cause them to be denied final eschatological justification, or is he giving them warning that they risk loss of God’s temporal blessing, divine protection, and eschatological reward? The full answer to this question lies outside the scope of this paper. However, the discussion below may offer some clues.

Context Must Be Determinative

On a purely grammatical and syntactical level, the two competing options are equally valid translations. Therefore, we must turn to context for clues as to which option is superior. In this regard, three main points of emphasis will be considered: 1) James’ audience, 2) the overall structure and purpose of the letter, and 3) the way in which 2:1-13 progresses both as a self-contained unit of argument and as seen in the overall structure of the book.

James’ Audience

Throughout the epistle, James addresses his readers as ἀδελφοί “brothers” (4:11; 5:7, 9, 10), ἀδελφοὶ μου “my brothers” (1:2; 2:1, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 5:12, 19), and ἀδελφοὶ μου ἀγαπητοί “my beloved brothers” (1:16, 19; 2:5). In his monograph on the Epistle of James, Luke Cheung gives considerable space to discussing the book as a paraenetic letter (i.e. hortatory instruction), of which the language of close relationship is characteristic. In this context he remarks, “The talk of brothers and brotherly love is the way of the early church to speak of their relationship in Christ.”¹⁶ The familial language of brotherhood points to their common relationship with God, the Father, a point stressed by Dan McCartney, who says, “The church was

¹⁵ James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916), 186.

¹⁶ Luke L. Cheung, *The Genre, Composition and Hermeneutics of the Epistle of James* (Waynesboro, Georgia: Paternoster, 2003), 38.

the people of God, who call upon God as Father (1:27), and who thereby are his children and hence are siblings.”¹⁷

Besides the repeated use of the vocative, “brothers,” James leaves no doubt that he considers his audience to be genuine believers when he writes in 1:18, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.” Furthermore, James uses the first person plural pronoun ἡμεῖς (“us”), thereby identifying himself with his readers with regard to their spiritual condition. Nowhere in the epistle does James give any reason for thinking that his audience does not possess saving faith, not even in chapter 2. Failing to recognize this fact can lead to a misunderstanding of the thrust of James’ arguments and exhortations.

This is true of the unit with which this paper is concerned (2:1-13). Twice in this unit James addresses his readers as brothers. In verse one, he calls them “my brothers.” Then in verse five, he uses the even more intimate “my beloved brothers” (one of only three times in the entire letter). Ben Witherington makes considerable note of these two vocatives asserting, “James addresses his audience as ‘my brothers’ once more, so we may be sure he considered them Christians.”¹⁸

It was shown above that if 2:1 is a rhetorical question, it has to be taken as indicating that showing partiality precludes possession of faith in Jesus. If this is true, then verses 2-13 must be addressed to people who do not possess faith in Jesus, for it is clear that James’ readers have been showing partiality. While verses 2-4 may be taken as a hypothetical situation in which a rich man enters the assembly and is shown favoritism by those in the assembly, verse six clearly indicates that this is in actuality what is taking place.

However, if James is addressing Christians (as has been demonstrated) and is rebuking them for showing partiality, clearly James does not consider their wrong behavior as evidence of their non-possession of faith. These believers were sinning and needed to be rebuked. Indeed, this is precisely what James’ hortatory command in 2:1 was meant to accomplish. Thus, a proper understanding of the spiritual condition of James’ audience supports the command option for translating 2:1 over the question option.

Structure and Purpose of James

Martin Luther’s opinion of the Epistle of James has been famously noted.¹⁹ His criticism was not limited to the theological content of the letter, but also extended to its form and structure. Luther believed the epistle was simply a

¹⁷ Dan G. McCartney, *James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 85.

¹⁸ Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James, and Jude* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 452.

¹⁹ Luther called James “a right strawy epistle, having no true evangelical character.”

collection of various teachings thrown together in an unorganized way. Martin Dibelius brought this idea into modern scholarship arguing that James is a collection of loosely organized paraenetic units.²⁰

However, in the last few decades, many commentators have argued for a coherent structure to the letter. Using the tools of rhetorical analysis, scholars such as Wilhelm Wuellner, Lauri Thurén, Ben Witherington, and others have made attempts to identify the rhetorical structure of James. For example, Witherington agrees in large part with Thurén in recognizing “something like an exordium in James 1:1-18, which gives the major themes, and a peroration in James 5:7-20, which recapitulates the major themes and then offers a final emotive climax.”²¹ For our purposes here, it is not necessary to be overly specific about the contents of these sections of the letter. It suffices to say that, broadly speaking, James is concerned with showing his readers the proper attitude toward trials (1:2, 13; 5:7, 8a) and how to properly respond in the midst of them (1:5, 9, 10; 5:8b, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16), for this will result in maturity (1:4), blessing (1:12a; 5:11), and reward (1:12b; 5:7). On the other hand, it is possible to fail the test by giving in to lust, which produces sin and ultimately death if not dealt with (1:14-15; 5:14-16).²² And yet, this eventuality can be avoided through receiving the implanted word (1:21) and by turning from sin (5:20), both of which result in the salvation of the soul (i.e. preservation of life).²³

Witherington then sees 1:19-27 as the *propositio* of the letter, outlining James’ main concern: that his readers be doers of the word, not just hearers. It is this main proposition upon which the body of the letter (2:1-5:6) elaborates. In fact some have seen the body of the letter as being divided into three parts corresponding to and explaining the proverbial statement of 1:19b (“But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger”).²⁴ Thus, the letter may be outlined as follows:

- I. Prescript 1:1
- II. Exordium 1:2-18
- III. *Propositio* 1:19-27

²⁰ See Douglas Moo’s discussion of this in *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 43. See also McCartney, *James*, 58.

²¹ Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 393.

²² This concept is parallel to the sin leading to death in 1 John 5:16. Compare also Acts 5:1-11 and 1 Cor 11:29-30.

²³ See Fred Chay, “A Textual and Theological Exposition of the Logion: The Salvation of the Soul” (PhD diss., Trinity Theological Seminary, 2003) who argues that the salvation of the soul does not refer to deliverance from hell but has to do with the Christian walk (peripatology), sanctification, and eternal rewards based on the life lived. The salvation of the soul is mentioned at the beginning of the letter (in the exordium) and at the end (in the peroration) acting as an *inclusio*, which denotes that it is a theme of the letter.

²⁴ Robert W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997), 69-70. Cf. Zane Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character through Testing* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 15.

- IV. Body 2:1-5:6
 - A. Quick to Hear 2:1-26
 - B. Slow to Speak 3:1-18
 - C. Slow to Anger 4:1-5:6
- V. Peroratio 5:7-18
- VI. Closing Exhortation 5:19-20

With this understanding of the overall structure of James, a few comments can be made regarding the purpose of the letter. As already mentioned in the above discussion on the letter's structure, one of James' main concerns for his readers is their maturity. This is further evidenced by his use of certain key words in the epistle. James contrasts being "mature" (τέλειος) and "complete" (ὀλόκληρος) with being "divided" or "double-minded" (δίψυχος). Ralph Martin cogently notes

the way the τελ- word group is used with important nouns in the letter: with ἔργον ["work"] (1:4; 2:22), σοφία ["wisdom"] (cf. 1:5, 17), πίστις ["faith"] (2:22; cf. 1:6), and νόμος ["law"] (1:25; 2:8, 10). This is no accident, since 'the perfect person' (τέλειος ἀνὴρ) in 3:2 is one for whom there is no disparity between word and act, faith and works.²⁵

Joseph Mayor, commenting on the meaning of τέλειος, says that it does not mean "perfect" in the strict sense of the term." Rather, in the context of James, it refers to "Christians who have attained maturity of character and understanding."²⁶ Moo echoes this understanding of James' concern for maturity.

He [James] recognizes that his readers will not entirely be able to escape the influence of sin (3:2), but he calls on them to pursue the goal of being "perfect and complete" (1:4). Human "dividedness," the condition James calls *dipsychos*, "double-minded" or "double-souled," is the essence of the problem...In response to this tendency toward dividedness, James above all calls on his readers to progress toward Christian maturity..."²⁷

Thus, we can see from both the structure of the letter and from James' use of key words and concepts that his concern was not so much for his readers to test themselves whether they possessed faith in Christ but for them to grow and mature in the faith, having been brought forth by the word of truth (1:18).²⁸ As such, James understood that testing and trials are the catalysts for such growth, so he instructs

²⁵ Ralph M. Martin, *James* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1988), lxxix.

²⁶ Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1954), 36.

²⁷ Moo, *James*, 37.

²⁸ McCartney, *James*, 39 makes an interesting connection between the Epistle of James and James' letter to the believers in Antioch recorded in Acts 15:23-29. One connection that I noticed is how James ends his letter in Acts by saying that if the Gentile believers will abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication they "will do well," a phrase that appears in the Epistle of James (2:8, 19). Doing well is important to James for the reasons listed above: blessing, reward, salvation of the soul.

them to welcome trials and walk through them appropriately (1:2-17). This is achieved by receiving the word of God implanted (a reception of the word subsequent to being brought forth by the word), i.e. to be doers of the word and not merely hearers. As Witherington puts it, the issue in James is “orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.”²⁹

In light of this understanding of the structure and purpose of James, it should be clear that in the first section of the body of his letter (2:1-26), James does not want to question whether his readers possess faith, but to exhort them to be consistent in their faith. Translating 2:1 as a hortatory command is in full accord with the exigency of the letter.

2:1-13 as a Distinct Unit within the Larger Structure of James

Moving in from a wider understanding of the overall structure of James to a closer analysis of the immediate context of 2:1 serves to solidify support for the command option.

Mayor gives a brief overview of the beginning of the unit: “Courtesy to the rich, if combined with discourtesy to the poor, is a sign of weakness of faith, and proves that we are not whole-hearted in the service of Him who is the only glory of believers.”³⁰ McKnight concurs: “Their dominant disposition was one of faith in Jesus Christ, but, contradictorily, while believing in Jesus Christ they were showing favoritism toward the wealthy. This social exigency, namely partiality, is the situation into which the words of 2:1-13 are sent on a mission to change behavior.”³¹ Such a situation demanded prohibitive correction, and one with no less force than that which the μή + imperative construction carries.³²

Some helpful comments on James’ use of this construction may be given at this point. Throughout his epistle, James uses the μή + imperative construction. Below are all the instances (excluding 2:1):

- 1:16 “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.”
- 3:1 “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren...”
- 3:14 “...do not be arrogant...”
- 4:11 “Do not speak evil of one another, brethren.”
- 5:9 “Do not complain, brethren...”
- 5:12 “But above all, my brethren, do not swear...”

²⁹ Witherington, *Letter and Homilies*, 404.

³⁰ Mayor, *James*, cxxix.

³¹ McKnight, *James*, 175-176.

³² Wallace says this construction forbids an action, usually from a superior to an inferior in rank (*Grammar*, 750).

Notice that all but one (3:14) is explicitly addressed to James’ “brethren.” In fact, of the 17 times ἀδελφός/ἀδελφοί (“brother/brethren”) is used, 13 are in conjunction with an imperative.³³ The only time James addresses the brethren in a rhetorical question are 2:14 and 3:12a. If 2:1 is taken as imperative, this becomes 14 out of 18.

Witherington notes that James’ imperatives “usually do not stand in isolation but are accompanied by explanations (using *hoti* in Jas 1:12, 23; 3:1; 4:3, 5:8, 11), warrants (using *gar* in Jas 1:6, 7, 11, 13, 20, 24; 2:11, 13, 26; 3:2, 16; 4:14) or purpose clauses (Jas 1:3; 5:8).”³⁴ This is precisely what we find following 2:1. James uses a γάρ (“for”) construction in verse 2:2-4 to provide the warrant for his prohibition in 2:1. There is a close parallel to this form of paraenesis in chapter 3 (the second main section of the body of the letter). There, James begins the unit with a prohibitive command (“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren...”) followed by a γάρ construction providing the warrant. The parallel use of the vocative “my brethren” in 2:1 (“My brethren, do not hold your faith...”) is worthy of note as well. Dan McCartney affirms that

The vocative “my brothers” in James usually occurs with an imperative..., but 2:14 and 3:12a address rhetorical questions to “my brothers,” the latter being quite similar in form to 2:1 (μή with indicative). Given the author’s penchant for rhetorical questions in this opening part of James 2..., 2:1 could well be such a question. However, the formal similarity between 2:1 and 3:1, and the fact that 3:1 is much less likely to be a rhetorical question, favor reading this verse as an imperative.³⁵

The parallels between chapters 2 and 3 do not stop here. McCartney supplies the following very useful chart illustrating the similarities in construction between the two units.³⁶

Favoritism, and Works Generally (2:1-26)	Speech, and Wisdom Generally (3:1-18)
“My brothers, do not have” (2 nd plur. pres. impv. verb; v. 1)	“My brothers, do not be” (2 nd plur. pres. impv. verb; v. 1)
“for”	“for”
conditional sentence to demonstrate preceding (vv. 2-4)	conditional sentence to demonstrate preceding (vv. 2-3)
“Listen” (v. 5)	“Look” (v. 4)
first concluding (double) proverb (v. 13)	first concluding (double) proverb (vv. 11-12)
Secondary Development: Faith That Works versus Empty Faith (vv. 14-26)	Secondary Development: Wisdom from Above versus Earthly Wisdom (vv. 13-18)
“What good is it?” (v. 14)	“Who is wise?” (v. 13)

³³ With the imperative: 1:2, 9, 16, 19; 2:5; 3:1; 4:11a; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19. Although 3:10 uses the infinitive, the idea expressed is one of “ought-ness” (“My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”). Without the imperative: 2:14a, 15; 3:12; 4:11b. I have counted 4:11b once, although “brother appears twice (“He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother...”).

³⁴ Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 388.

³⁵ Dan G. McCartney, *James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 135.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

<i>if</i> clause with negative example (vv. 15-16)	<i>if</i> clause with negative example (v. 14)
development (vv. 17-25)	development (vv. 15-17)
concluding proverb (v. 26)	concluding proverb (v. 18)

Given this convincing demonstration of the parallelism between chapters 2 and 3, it is hard to see how 2:1 can be taken as a question, when 3:1 is clearly a command.³⁷

Conclusion

A difficult aspect of translating the biblical text is not allowing pre-commitments to certain theological positions to predispose us to a particular rendering of the text before we give due diligence to a thorough exegesis of it. My hope is that this paper represents a modicum of such exegesis.

With regard to the question at hand, a study of the identity and spiritual condition of James' readers, an understanding of the letter's structure and James' purpose in writing it, and a closer look at the unit containing the verse in question leads to the conclusion that the best translation of 2:1 is as a prohibitive command as opposed to a rhetorical question with a presupposed negative response (or even as an implied condition via an "if" statement).

A survey of several major commentaries on James corroborates this view. Many commentators do not even address the issue, simply presupposing the command option (e.g. Ben Witherington, Douglas Moo, Luke Cheung, Peter Davids, Ralph Martin). Others entertain the option but end up arguing for the command option.

Scot McKnight, who compares the New Revised Standard Version with the Today's New International Version (his two favored translations³⁸), takes the question option of the NRSV to task and sides with the TNIV's command translation.³⁹ Likewise, Joseph Mayor,⁴⁰ Dan McCartney,⁴¹ and James Hardy Ropes⁴² provide a discussion of the two options, eventually coming down on the side of the command option. In my limited search of the scholarly literature on James, I did not find any commentator who preferred the question option, which serves to support the conclusion of this paper.

Settling upon the command option for translating 2:1 allows us to make a determination regarding to the ramifications of each view as discussed above. The conclusion that 2:1 is a prohibitive command removes the possibility of using it in

³⁷ See also Luke Cheung's comparison of 2:1 and 3:1 (*Genre, Composition, and Hermeneutics*, 75).

³⁸ See the preface to his commentary, p. xii.

³⁹ McKnight, *James*, 176.

⁴⁰ Mayor, *James*, 79.

⁴¹ McCartney, *James*, 135.

⁴² Ropes, *St. James*, 186.

support of the view that faith without works is not genuine and therefore not saving faith. Those who would take 2:14-26 in this way cannot use 2:1 in support of their argument. Taking it as a prohibitive command presupposes that those who have faith in Jesus can act inconsistently with that faith and need to be corrected with respect to their behavior rather than being called to a genuine saving faith.