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... And Works: A Reading on Faith and Works from the Epistle of James

Lee Magness
jlmagness@milligan.edu

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“ . . . And Works ”

A Reading on Faith and Works from the Epistle of James Lee Magness

This reading uses the teaching on faith and works in James 2.14–26 as the interpretive key to other passages in James. It is configured here for three voices. Voice 1 rewords the various refrains regarding faith and works, like “Faith without works is dead.” Voice 2 reads the passage from James under consideration. And Voice 3 provides a brief interpretation of each passage in the light of 2.14–26.

1 ~ Faith and the Work of Endurance

1 James says, “Faith is active along with works” (2.22).

2 *Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,
because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance;
and let endurance have its full effect,
so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (1.2–3)*

3 Faith is fine.

But faith must be followed by works, by endurance.

Faith must have its effect,

the maturity that flows from the endurance that follows faith.

1 So faith is brought to completion by works (2.22).

2 ~ Faith and the Work of Obedience

1 James says, “Faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead” (2.17).

2 *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.
For if any are hearers of the word and not doers,
they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;
for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.
But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere,
being not hearers who forget but doers who act—
they will be blessed in their doing. (1.22–25)*

3 Faith comes by hearing.

But hearing-faith must be followed by doing-faith.

Hearing-faith may forget,

but doing-faith acts, obeys, perseveres.

1 So faith without works is also dead (2.26).

3 ~ Faith and the Work of Devotion

1 James says, “Faith apart from works is barren?” (2.20).

2 *If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.*

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (1.26–27)*

3 Religion is how we relate to God.

But real religion is more than believing right things.

Devotion demands doing—controlling, caring, cleansing.

“Realigion” is how we live, within, and in the world.

1 So a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (2.24).

4 ~ Faith and the Work of Respect

1 James says, “Faith is active along with works” (2.22).

2 *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?*

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith

and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

But you have dishonored the poor. (2.1–6)

3 Faith shows no favoritism.

Neither must deeds discriminate.

Faith must be followed by works of respect—

the work of noticing and welcoming and choosing and honoring.

1 So faith is brought to completion by works (2.22).

5 ~ Faith and the Work of Love

1 Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (2.17)

2 *You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture,
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.

*For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy;
mercy triumphs over judgment. (2.8–10, 12–13)*

3 The work of faith is always linked to the labor of love (1 Thessalonians 1.3).

A faith that frees overflows into a love that liberates.

Believing begets speaking, believing begets acting.

And love is manifested in mercy.

1 So faith without works is also dead (2.26).

6 ~ *Faith and the Work of Wisdom*

1 A person is justified by works and not by faith alone (2.24).

2 *Who is wise and understanding among you?*

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield,

full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (3.13, 17–18)

3 The faithful life, the wise life, is the good life.

The good life is gracious and gentle, pure and peaceable,
yielding and yielding fruit, sensitive and sincere.

The “good” is as important as the “works.”

1 Faith apart from works is barren? (2.20).

7 ~ *Faith and Work of Worship*

1 Faith is active along with works (2.22).

2 *Submit yourselves therefore to God.*

Draw near to God.

Cleanse your hands, and purify your hearts.

Humble yourselves before the Lord. (4.7–10)

3 Worship takes work,

not just right attitudes but right actions.

Like Abraham we believe God,

and like Abraham we offer our best, our being, to God.

1 So faith is brought to completion by works (2.22).

LEE MAGNESS IS PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF NEW TESTAMENT AT MILLIGAN COLLEGE IN TENNESSEE AND CONTINUES ADJUNCT TEACHING AT MILLIGAN COLLEGE AND EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY (JLMAGNESS@MILLIGAN.EDU).

