OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Demonstrating Authentic Faith

David Anguish

In his volume on James in the Pillar NT commentary series, Douglas Moo concludes his discussion of James 2.14–26 with a quotation from the preface to Martin Luther's commentary on Romans:

> O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works (Moo 2000, 144).

Moo quotes that passage to emphasize its irony, for Martin Luther is well known for his criticism of James's emphasis on works in James 2 in the belief that he contradicted Paul's teaching on salvation by faith in Romans 3–4. But in fact, though they are nuanced differently, James's affirmation that genuine faith is active sounds much like statements of both Jesus and Paul (cf. Matt 7.21; Gal 5.6).

To summarize our *overview* of the teaching of James 2.14–26, James links his previous call to be doers of the word (1.22–25) and properly care for the disadvantaged (1.22–2.13) with his insistence that real faith is demonstrated by works. He illustrates with the example of a destitute brother who was offered prayerful good wishes but no assistance (2.15–16). Such "faith" by

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itself did no good and was in fact dead (2.14, 17). Anticipating an objection alleging that faith and works are but different gifts, James recalls the familiar examples of Abraham and Rahab, both of whom demonstrated active, merciful faith. They were "justified by works" (vv. 21, 24), their faith having been shown by their actions, not merely their words. In the fifth and final statement of his point in the passage, James concludes in 2.26: "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."

In this part of our study, we will note three applications of James's teaching.

First, authentic faith involves more than ritual and orthodoxy. One of the most trenchant points in James's critique of workless faith is found in verse 19: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" While it is a vital component of authentic faith, mere affirmation of the Shema is not sufficient to demonstrate it.

In emphasizing this point, James in effect revisits a longstanding problem among God's people, vividly illustrated in Jeremiah 7.1–15. Distressed by the prophet's prediction that the temple would be destroyed unless they changed their ways, the people of Judah chose to "trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (v. 4; their words sound somewhat like a pep-rally cheer or protest chant). But of themselves, the temple and its rituals would not save them. They needed to amend their ways, treat each other justly, and "not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow" (v. 6; cf. Jas 1–2). Nor were they to shed innocent blood in the temple or go after other gods. Of itself, correct worship in the place God had designated would not rescue them so long as they countenanced theft, adultery, false testimony, and idolatry (vv. 8–10). To continue as they were living was to make the temple "a den of robbers," not the holy dwelling place of the LORD it was intended to be (v. 11). If they continued on their course, the temple would be destroyed. If they doubted that, they need only "go to the place that was at Shiloh" where God had first made his name to dwell and see what he had done to it because of Israel's evil (v. 12).

Jeremiah's warning remains relevant. The acts of hearing and affirming faith, even where divinely designated worship ritual is observed, cannot be substituted for practicing justice. As Kent Hughes wrote, "Tragically Hell will have its share of people who are monotheistic, Trinitarian, orthodox and *lost*" (Hughes 1991, 112).

Second, authentic faith actively cares for the poor and oppressed. The principle stated in James 2 is broader in scope (see below), but we must not stress it to the exclusion of James's specific point of application. His definition of faith in 2.14–26 is written to support his call to the community to practice God-like and God-honoring treatment of the disadvantaged, specifically the orphans, widows, and poor. As noted in previous background studies (*here*, *here*), James's emphasis in this regard stood firmly within the longstanding tradition that originated in the Old

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Testament, continued in Second Temple Judaism, and was expected in the early church. At a time when attention in budget allocation is focused on a variety of important and, yes, authorized practices and needs of the modern church, it is worth taking a step back to ask whether more attention should be given to the fact that, in the NT, the explicit aim of the collections was to help the poor (cf. Acts 11.29; 24.17; Rom 15.16, 25–29; 1 Cor 16.1; 2 Cor 8–9; Gal 2.10). As Blomberg and Kamell write, "James certainly would share the concern of [those who seek] to do far more for the poor, individually and systematically, than many branches of recent Christianity have attempted" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 143–144).

Third, authentic faith is not limited to James's specific application in 1.26–2.26. Blomberg and Kamell go on to say, "James would most assuredly insist that it counts for nothing to claim to accept a free gift of salvation without transferring one's allegiance to Jesus as the Ultimate Master of one's life and possessions" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 144). Notice especially their use of the word *life.* Commitment and demonstration of authentic faith is all-encompassing, involving more than being a member on the roll or even consistent attendance in the church's gatherings. To professing believers with that mindset, James would surely ask, "Do you really believe? Your works say differently."

In his treatment of James 2, Kent Hughes references a parable from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) as cited by Gary Vanderet (*Discovery Papers* Number 3989 [May 25, 1986], "The Skill of Genuine Faith"). It is an allegory that depicts Kierkegaard's concern over the lack of authentic Christian faith in his day:

> It was Sunday morning, and all the ducks dutifully came to church, waddling through the doors and down the aisle into their pews where they comfortably squatted. When all were well-settled, and the hymns were sung, the duck minister waddled to his pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read: "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" It was a marvelous, elevating duck scripture, and thus all the ducks quacked their assent with a hearty "Amen!"—and then they plopped down from their pews and *waddled* home (Hughes 1991, 115).

It's not a great stretch to think James would have approved of Kierkegaard's parable and might point out that if we say we believe we can "fly," then we should not be "waddling."

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' May 28, 2024"
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