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Title: Faith Works: Endures

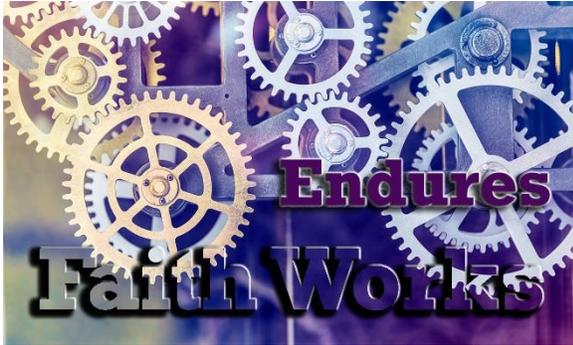
Date: June 9 & 10, 2018

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Psalm 27:1-5,13-14](#)

Text: [James 1:1-8, 12](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



It is wonderful being back with you. If you have been around very long, you know we love to travel. Fortunately, I get to travel to some cool places carrying the bags of my wife Ann. As fashionable as she dresses, that isn't easy work. Ann serves the children of the world through Kiwanis International. This time we found

ourselves in northern Italy attending the European convention of Kiwanis at Lake Maggiore. The gateway city was Milan. You may think Milan is a city of fashion but Milan is an important place in the history of Christianity. The Edict of Milan was signed in 313, ending the Roman persecution of Christianity. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, baptized Augustine on Easter 386. The cathedral in Milan is the third largest in the world. One of the most iconic Christian pictures in the world is found in a monks' dining hall, Leonardo DaVinci's The Last Supper. Embracing this history, seeing the Duomo and experiencing the Last Supper was a wonderful pilgrimage. I'm always inspired by places where people have tried to live their lives as faithful Christians.

That's the theme of a journey we are starting today as we begin a sermon series titled Faith Works. It is based on one of the most misunderstood, but meaningful books in the New Testament, the Epistle of James. James is called a general Epistle because it isn't sent to a specific church like Corinth or Rome. Rather it is written to the Jewish Christian community at large, the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion." It is estimated that 5,000,000 Jews were living in Asia Minor and Southern Europe at the time the birth of Jesus. This community became some of the first converts to Christianity and it is to them James writes.

James is misunderstood because of controversy surrounding its authorship, and purpose. The letter begins simply, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ..." (James 1:1a) but that doesn't tell us a lot. There were lots of James in the Bible, as many as six James in the New Testament. Two

were disciples of Jesus. Over the last few decades, more and more scholars have come to believe that "James was written by Jesus' brother, the James who was a leader in the church in Jerusalem, the one whom Paul calls, 'the Lord's brother.'" (Galatians 1:19) Paul recognizes him, along with Peter and John as the three pillars of the early church (Galatians 2:9)¹ It makes it an exciting book to study.

The larger misunderstanding has to do with content. Paul clearly teaches that by faith alone that we are saved, we are justified. That's not the name of a Triple Crown winner. It is a doctrine, the doctrine of justification by faith. We don't work our way into heaven. Rather, we are justified by our faith, reconciled with God through our faith in Jesus. Some suggest that James contradicts this doctrine. Martin Luther said as much, calling it a "straw epistle," that James says you get right with God by your good works. A more careful reading suggests that this isn't the reason that James wrote this letter. Rather, he writes words of instructions on how our lives as Christians, we are not working for our salvation; that has already been accomplished. Instead, we work as an expression of our gratitude for the gift of salvation we have already received.

It is why the title of the series is "Faith Works." It is a play on words. Faith works in the sense that faith acts. Faith must be put into action. If you have faith, you have to work. But then in another sense, faith works because faith is effective. It actually works. Faith is valuable and comes to life in us in our works.

Over the next few weeks, we will see this as the emerging theme. Faith shows up fourteen times in this short book. That's about 3 times a chapter. But the picture of faith is work. Out of the 108 verses, there are 59 commands. That is a command every other verse. Do this, do that. Get the picture? James is a "how to" manual. It's the "Nike letter in the Bible."² Just do it. Next week, we'll look at one of the most memorized verses from the book of James which says just that. "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers." (James 1:22)

But that's getting ahead of the game. We need to start first and I'll be honest. You probably aren't going to like the starting place. His first command is this. "Consider it nothing but joy." And what are we to consider as joy? Tough times. Challenges. Stress. Trials, troubles, and temptations. James says, "Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." (James 1:2) I'd like to nominate that for one of the more outrageous statements in the New Testament. Consider your trials joy? Are you kidding me? But James says "No. Consider it nothing but joy."

Maybe this is a reason James hasn't had huge popularity over the centuries. It starts off with what might be perceived as rather depressing news, the reality of trial and troubles in life. Notice that he doesn't say "if trouble comes;" he says, "when." He presupposes that every human being is going to experience trials and trouble. Christians aren't exempt. Dark times are inevitable and you are to "consider it nothing but joy."

I don't know about you but I kind of wish this wasn't in the Bible because it is just the opposite of the way we think. We generally count it as joy when we avoid trials and tribulations. We jump for joy when the medical test comes back negative or when we walk away from an accident unscathed. We rejoice at birth not at death, at getting a job not losing one. "Consider it nothing but joy" is diametrically opposed to the way we would naturally look at life's challenges.

Why this command and what is James trying to teach us? To put on a happy face and say you love misery? No, not at all. The first clue comes in understanding the word "consider." When James says "consider" he uses the Greek word "hegeomai (ἡγεομαι). The word literally means "to think ahead, forward." The tense of the verb indicates that James was signaling the fact that the trial itself was not joy but what comes afterwards is. It anticipates something in the future, rather than considering something in the present. This thinking ahead mentality is, we are told, the way Jesus looked at his own suffering. A couple of pages before the end of Hebrews, we hear these words "Jesus, the author, and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross." (Hebrews 12:2) That's is weird. How do you endure the cross with joy? Only by anticipating his future, considering that the cross was going to give way to the crown, that death would be defeated by the resurrection, and the ultimate joy in the suffering was sitting at the right hand of God.³ "Consider it nothing but joy" comes in understanding that there is something bigger going on, something beyond "me." It is future-oriented.

Written within this context, James goes on to tell us the benefits of following this command. It gives birth to endurance and endurance produces spiritual maturity. James says it this way. "...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." (James 1:2-3)

Endurance, perseverance leads to maturity. James says that when we are tested when we struggle with trials and stresses when we endure, we become stronger. It leads to spiritual maturity. Troubles are part of our

growing up and maturing. We can point to lots of examples of this in our life and our world.

For instance, do you remember when Mshangao was born at the Indianapolis Zoo? He was the male articulated giraffe that was born a couple of January ago, coming in at a cute but not insignificant birth weight of 158 pounds. The birth of giraffe is an amazing thing. The first things to emerge are the baby giraffe's front hooves and head. A few minutes later the plucky newborn calf is hurled forth, falls ten feet, and lands on its back. Within seconds, he rolls to an upright position with his legs tucked under his body. From this position, he considers the world for the first time and shakes off the last vestiges of the birthing fluid from his eyes and ears.

"The mother giraffe lowers her head long enough to take a quick look. Then she positions herself directly over her calf. She waits for about a minute, and then she does the most unreasonable thing. She swings her long, pendulous leg outward and kicks her baby so that it is sent sprawling head over heels. "When it doesn't get up, the violent process is repeated over and over again. The struggle to rise is momentous. As the baby calf grows tired, the mother kicks it again to stimulate its efforts. Finally, the calf stands for the first time on its wobbly legs. Then the mother giraffe does the most remarkable thing. She kicks it off its feet again. Why? She wants it to remember how it got up. In the wild, baby giraffes must be able to get up as quickly as possible in order to stay with the herd, where there is safety. Lions, hyenas, leopards, and wild hunting dogs all enjoy young giraffes, and they'd get it, too, if the mother didn't teach her calf to get up quickly and get with it..."⁴

The mother giraffe is doing what James says has to happen to us when facing trials. We fall down and get back up and that builds endurance. With endurance, our faith becomes mature and complete, lacking in nothing. We ultimately know this and experience this in life. Remember how your children learned to walk, the trial and error of bumps and bruises, getting up on wobbly legs, falling, and then trying again and again until they got it down, until they had the strength to endure a long walk.

Remember what it was like to learn to ride a bicycle, the fears, the wobbly wheel? The skinned knees and tears until you persevered? We have earlier experiences in life managing stress, trials, and challenges and then we learn the expressions around them. What did our coaches teach us? No pain, no gain. You learn that what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. James recognizes that trials and troubles are part of our spiritual growth and maturing.

Trials and struggles lead to endurance. Endurance leads to maturity which then leads to another benefit. Trust and reliance upon God. So James commands, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. (James 1:5). Again, this comes within the context of trials. James is saying that whatever challenge you face when you don't understand what's going on, or how you are going to manage, or what is going to see you through it, ask God for wisdom. James says, "Ask." Pray. Turn to God and God will help you understand, help you endure. God will fill you with the wisdom.

Please note, this isn't about knowledge. Most of us have knowledge. We know what's going on when we are facing a trial. It's not a lack of information. In fact, often we have too much information and we obsess and ruminate about what we know. We go to all sorts of places that aren't helpful at all.

James isn't talking about knowledge. James says to ask God for wisdom and wisdom will lead to perspective. It will help you understand and find strength for the next steps. But we have to ask with the belief that wisdom and strength will be offered because James quickly adds: "But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind." (James 1:6) If you have ever been to the ocean, you know what James is getting at. The wave moves whichever way the pressure pushes it. If the pressure goes this way, that's the way the wave goes. If the pressure goes that way, that's the way the wave goes. A lot of Christians are like that when it comes to their problems. They get pushed around by doubt, anxiety, over analyzing which simply wears you out, like you've spent time in the surf, being pushed around. Doubt gets caught up in counting problems rather than possibilities. Doubt gives power to the trouble; faith gives power to God's strength. James says, don't doubt. Ask in faith for God's wisdom and it will help you endure.

Finally, James that says, "Blessed is anyone who endures temptation." (James 1:12a) Does that sound familiar? It should. It is an allusion to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus teaches about persecution and the trials of being reviled. Jesus says we are blessed and will receive a reward. There are a number of places where James will use the beatitudes in this letter. In this is one which is why he goes on to add: "Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him." (James 1:12b) Don't picture some diamond-studded headpiece like worn by Megan Markel when getting married, a crown that a king or a queen wears. That's not the picture that the original readers of James saw. Rather, they envisioned the laurel wreath that was put on the head of an

athlete who had competed in a race or had been victorious in some kind of competition.

This image is found throughout the New Testament. A crown is something that we receive for faithfulness at the end of our life, a picture that at the end of our life of trials and troubles, there is a crown waiting for us. Paul offers this when he writes: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness..." (2 Timothy 4:7-8a) This picture gives us great joy as we endure our trials.

As I look over this congregation gathered today or think about who will read the sermon or watch it online, I know that the number of challenges and trials that are being experienced, day after day is enormous. Some are the small things that happen almost daily in every life. Others are the tragic devastating trials that threaten your very existence. Whether big or small, all of us have trials, trouble, and problems. Each of us would do well to consider carefully what it is that we are going through today and then, use James commands to work. Why? Because James says our faith gives us the power and perspective to focus not on the troubles but how best to overcome them and endure. So, whatever you are facing...

Consider it nothing but joy. Let endurance have its full effect. Ask in faith for wisdom; and if you do, know that you will eventually receive the crown of life. Do this because James says it is the way faith works.

¹ Mr. Luke Timothy Johnson. Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James (Kindle Locations 319-322). Kindle Edition.

³ HAWKINS, OS. Preaching from the book of James. *Southwestern Journal of Theology*. 43, 1, 56-77, 2000. ISSN: 0038-4828.

⁴In View from the Zoo. Gary Richmond. Found in "Trouble, a required course in life." Eric Ritz. Retrieved by subscription at sermons.com, #1349177.