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**Title:** Faith Works: Acts

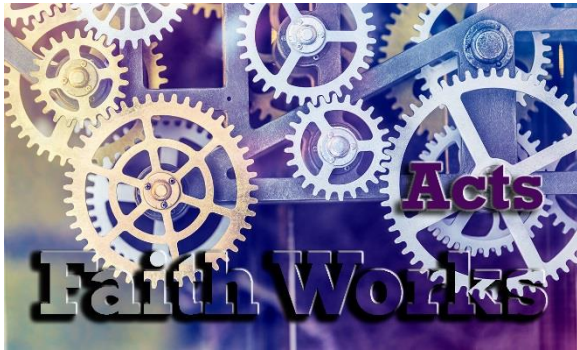
**Date:** June 23 & 24, 2018

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [1 John 3:16-18](#)

**Text:** [James 2:14-26](#)

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Today we are going to talk about the subject of death. That might surprise you because you thought we were in a series about the book of James. But the subject is death and because of it, it could be a hard conversation.

Doctors say that the toughest conversation they have is to tell the family that a loved one is dead. No one wants to hear such news. So, it is important that the declaration is correct. Rarely, but occasionally, a person appears to have died but isn't dead at all. He or she suddenly exhibits signs of life again; some even recover. Because of this, in cases when a person is sustained by life support but is believed to be otherwise dead, a standard that was developed 50 years ago and now has international consensus. The patient is dead when there is no longer any functioning brain activity.

These criteria were developed by a committee at Harvard Medical School in 1968. It is determined in two ways. First, there is a detailed process that ascertains the person's inability to respond to stimuli: to voice, touch, or pain; and second, it confirms that the brainstem no longer acts to regulate the person's breathing. Thus, if removed from the ventilator, the person will not breathe on his or her own.<sup>1</sup> "No patient with a proper diagnosis of brain death ever has recovered to come off life support. When life support is withdrawn the heart invariably stops within minutes." No response, no activity. Dead.<sup>2</sup>

While physical death is not our subject today, I've started the criteria for death because this is what James is doing in our passage today. He's not talking about dead people; he is talking about dead faith. He says it this way. "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2:17) Like a Harvard medical team, James establishes the criteria for assessment.

You might have expected this if you were here last week. James set this up with a challenge in the first chapter. "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." (James 1:22) It is where James gets the

reputation of being the Nike book of the Bible. Just do it. And in the first chapter, he invites you to consider whether or not you are wearing those sneakers. He encourages self-assessment about your behavior, suggesting that we look into the mirror of God's Word to see how we are really acting.

Once he is through with this section, you'd think he'd have it out of his system. But he hasn't. He starts in again and develops his criteria to determine if faith is dead. Faith is dead when you neglect widows and orphans. Faith is dead when you show favoritism and end up dishonoring the poor. Faith is dead when you choose to follow some of the Law but ignore or break others. It's dead when you fail to love your neighbor as yourself and when you show no mercy or refuse to show hospitality to strangers. He sums it all up and says, this is the criteria. When you don't respond to the stimuli of need and there is no activity, when you don't act, faith is dead.

As we began this series, I shared that this section of material in the Book of James is not without controversy. Some, including Martin Luther, felt like James was contradicting Paul. At first, it can sound a little bit that way. In Romans, Paul declared, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." (Romans 3:28) And in Galatians, he said it again: "And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law..." (Galatians 2:16)

Paul is concerned that we understand how we get right with God, how we are saved. He insists that it isn't something that we do. It is only done through Christ Jesus. Our salvation comes through grace alone. You can't earn it by how you act or the work you do.

But that's not the issue for James. He's not concerned about how we get right before God. James' issue is how you demonstrate to others the claim that you are right before God. James is not talking about works as a means to salvation, but as a proof of faith and a sign of salvation. It is why he begins this section with a rhetorical question. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" (James 2:14)

James is writing to his brothers and sisters and in doing so, includes himself in the community of believers. He isn't trying to put them down or judge them. Rather, he is inviting again, self-evaluation. You see this because he doesn't say, "If someone has faith but not works!" James says, "If someone says they have faith or claims to have faith." In such a case the claim to faith isn't validated. Faith isn't just talking. For faith to be true, you have to act.

Do you know that when asked, a very high percentage of Americans still say they are Christian? It is a little over 70 percent. But are they in church on Sunday? On any given Sunday, over a 1/3 say they seldom or never attend even though they still say they are Christians.<sup>3</sup> Are they involved in ministries that help the poor? Of those who claim to be Christian, half don't.<sup>4</sup> Do they watch what they say and make sure their words honor God? That one's tough to quantify but important never the less. Commitment to community, compassion, and conversation are a big theme for James in talking about how Faith Works. Next week, we will look at the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter and the issue of how you talk reveals your walk.

This rhetorical question, "What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works?" could be asked to Americans who claim to be believers, but don't walk the talk. James might say, their faith is dead. But you need to be careful when approaching scripture and assuming that the words only apply to others. James wants the reader, which in this case is you, to ask yourself those questions. So he follows a well-known pattern for dialog in Greek teaching. He asks questions and then answers objections before they are raised. "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 is the good of that?" (James 2:15-16) It is something of a ludicrous example but it makes a strong point. The original Jewish Christians that James is writing to would have heard within the question, the tradition blessing. Shalom. God bless you. God be with you. Be warm and well fed." It is what you said to someone who had been to your home and experienced hospitality. What good is that for a naked, hungry person? It's no good. It's useless. It is a dead blessing.

In the same way, this kind of faith does nothing for the person in need. And James would add, this kind of so-called faith, does nothing for your soul. Someone who does not respond to a brother or sister in need does not have faith. Rather, James would say, their faith is dead.

James isn't the only one to suggest this. John does also when he writes "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (1 John 3:17). The implication is there's no way that the love of God can in him because if it was there, he would act. So John goes on to say "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:17-18) James and John agree. Acts of mercy and compassion are not a means of salvation. Rather, they are evidence of salvation.

If this position sounds familiar to you, it should. Over the last two weeks, I've pointed out that James, who was the brother of Jesus, makes extensive use of Jesus' teaching. This rhetorical question echoes Jesus' last parable and specifically, another question, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food...or naked and gave you clothing?" (Matthew 25:37b. 38c) And the answer is "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:39)

It is hard to listen to James' question about a hungry brother or sister and not think of Jesus' questions in this parable. And it hard not to think of the negative answer at the end of the parable. In Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, those who didn't respond to the need, who didn't act, aren't saved.

The parable and James are both saying this. "Those who ignore the hungry and naked are ignoring Jesus himself, and those who ignore Jesus do not really him in their hearts." Jesus and James are *NOT* saying, "Do good work. Act with mercy and compassion in order to be saved." Rather, they are saying, "When Christ is in your heart, you act with mercy and compassion. It will flow to those who are needy around you."

Acts of mercy and compassion to human need are such essential marks of a Christian that they can be used as a test of true faith. Mercy and compassion are not optional additions to being a Christian. Rather, a life poured out in good works is the sign of genuine faith. If there is no mercy toward the needy, then there is no faith. It is dead. Acts of mercy and compassion are evidence of salvation.<sup>5</sup>

James continues his dialogue with an imaginary person who says, "You have faith and I have works." He is trying to separate the two from one another. Some people have mercy, some don't. Some people work. Some don't. James says, "No way. You can't separate these two and to try to do so is nonsensical. "Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?" (James 1:20). It's useless. It's dead, like a dead person and that's exactly what James says, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead." (James 1:26)

James is teaching us that faith and works go together. Or to use one classic example. Think of faith/works dichotomy like a rowboat with the word "faith" on one oar and the word "works" on the other oar. When we try rowing with either of the oars alone, the boat simply goes in a tight circle, clockwise with one oar and counterclockwise with the other. To actually go anywhere, both oars need to be used together.

We began talking about a body being dead and once a person meets the criteria for being brain dead, resuscitation isn't possible. But at this point, it might be good to remind us that we are a resurrection people and as such, we believe in new life. Even dead faith can come alive again and.... it did. New life and new faith were discovered by the first people James was writing to. Remember, his first audiences are the Christian Jews, in the diaspora, the ones in Asia Minor and Southern Europe.

We see that dead faith was resurrected in the way the second-century historian Aristides described the Christians to the Roman Emperor, Hadrian: "They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead, through the Spirit, in God." <sup>6</sup> Go back to the description that James makes about faith that is dead. A dead faith:

- Neglects widows and orphans
- Shows favoritism
- Dishonors the poor
- Ignores or breaks the law
- Fails to love neighbor as yourself
- Shows no mercy

It's as if they have used it as a checklist to make sure they were covering all of the bases in the way they act. They were doing what James told them to do, putting into practice the word. Faith was resurrected because they responded to all of the stimuli and there was activity. They

- Cared for widows and orphans
- Showed equality
- Honored the poor
- Kept the law
- Loved their neighbor like self
- Showed mercy and hospitality

In the end, James says it is the way you know if faith is alive or dead. Acts of mercy and compassion are such an essential mark of being a Christian that it can be used as the test of true faith.

Go back and look at that list. Make it your checklist. Based on the criteria established by James, if you are the patient, (and you are), what is the diagnosis? Are you responding to the stimuli and showing activity? Is your

faith dead or alive? I pray that the answer is alive and well. It will be if you act because James says, that is the way Faith Works.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Smith; Brain death: time for an international consensus, *BJA: British Journal of Anaesthesia*, Volume 108, Issue suppl\_1, 1 January 2012, Pages i6–i9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bja/aer355>

<sup>2</sup> Dead Faith, September 8, 2018. Retrieved by subscription @ homiletics.com

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/166250/americans-practice-charitable-giving-volunteerism.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Keller, Tim. Mercy.

<sup>6</sup> Gushee and Sharp, *Evangelical Ethics, A Reader*. 2015. Page 57.