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Title: Faith Works: Trusts

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Scripture: [Luke 12:16-21](#)

Text: [James 4:13-17](#)

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We are on the back straight-away of our study of the book of James. The title FaithWorks is a play on words. Faith works in the sense that it acts. That's important to James. Faith must be put in action. But faith actually works. It's effective. When put into practice, faith makes a difference in your life.

Today is the fifth sermon in the series and James asks the question, "Does it? Does your faith make a difference in your life?" It's a question about trust and application. You may not hear it that way but that is the intent of a question found at the end of chapter four. He wants you to consider if your faith works when he asks "What is your life?"

You know that question, don't you? "What is your life?" The longer a person lives, the more a person needs to examine the meaning of life and ask this question. Psychologists teach that soon after entering adolescence, we start asking this question. It comes in the form of "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?" Do you remember what your teen years were like asking those questions? If you have forgotten, the youth who are in worship can give you firsthand information. It is rough going and at times, painful, for both the teen and the people around them.

The work of identity formation never stops. As we move into young adulthood, we first try to discover and develop our potentials, what things we can do better than other things. Then, we seek to discover our purpose for life, what we want to accomplish. Finally, we must join the two, our potential and our purpose. They are the ultimate answer to "What is your life?" It is the marriage of your gifts and graces coupled with your direction and purpose. Over and over again, at various stages, we ask ourselves this question. "What is my life?" We never stop asking it, even to our dying days. Thanatologists and counselors know it is the business of dying, a final question which needs to be answered in order to die well.

James sets up this question by using an example of wealthy merchants who were answering the question, "What is life?" They were living as if there were endless potential and profit, acting as if they would live forever and that their plans would be inevitably fortuitous. They say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." (James 1:14)

Please note that when James uses this example, he isn't against business or making a profit. Rather, it is the attitude or outlook toward their activities that is the indictment. They are boastfully arrogant and James says so. "...you boast in your arrogant schemes." (James 4:16a) They are acting and living as though God didn't matter, as if whatever they plan will certainly get done. In their boasting and arrogance, they have failed to trust God. So, James calls out their self-sufficiency and self-importance because they were living as practical atheists.¹

We do the same thing, don't we? We plan and pursue our goals but don't consider how God is part of them. It is, after all, *our* life. The problem is not planning in and of itself; the problem is planning in such a way that God is not a part of those plans. James brings us back to reality. He reminds us that life is not ours to do with simply as we please. He says we can't live as functional atheists in our daily lives. So to get our attention, James offers a sobering assessment which literally pierces the heart. To the question "What is your life?" he answers. "It is a mist." "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14)

I became an expert on this passage in seminary, living in southern California. Anyone who has lived there knows that just about every day, there is a weather forecast that goes something like this. There will be late night and early morning low clouds. During much of the year, it was a daily experience to see the mist settle over the orange groves and in the foothills behind the campus. It was absolutely beautiful. I'd get in my car to head to my church and would watch an amazing transformation. As the sun would rise higher in the sky, the mist would burn off, gone in less than an hour in the heat of the southern California sun.

James says our lives are like that mist which vanishes. It is sobering reality and that uncertainty of life can cause us so much dread. We all know it's true and we do our best not to think about it, not to face the grim reality that this time next week the people we are sitting next to might be rearranging their schedules to attend your funeral. That's what James is saying. It can happen that fast. It can happen without any notice. What is our life? It's a mist!

To this less than encouraging reminder, James makes a famous statement, so famous that it has a name for it. James says "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills it...'" (James 4:14a)

I could ask for a show of hands of the number of people who have heard that expression and we'd probably get a unanimous response. I actually heard it used this week. After making a hospital call on Tuesday afternoon, I ran in a church member who is active in my Wednesday morning prayer breakfast. We chatted a bit then I said, 'I'll see you tomorrow at prayer breakfast.' He came back, "the good Lord willing." He had just quoted James and said something that Christians have been saying for nearly two thousand years.

It is named the "*conditio Jacobaea*." that is, the "Jacobean condition." Jacob is the Greek spelling of James. *Conditio Jacobaea* is in other words, the condition James imposes on a Christian's speech. When speaking about the future James says a believer should say, "if the Lord wills." *Conditio Jacobaea* was such a large part of the theology of the church that when the language faith shifted to Latin, the Jacobean condition was shortened to initials: the Latin letters D.V. It was short-hand, written at the end of statements and letters. D.V stands for *Deo volente*, "If God is willing" or "God being willing."

Even though you may not have connected that the expression as biblical, it is found in throughout the New Testament. Jesus taught that "whoever does the will of God, is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:35) In the sermon of the Mount, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21) In the same context, when he teaches the Lord's Prayer, he says, "your will be done." (Matthew 6:10b) He uses the phrase himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying, "not my will, but your will be done." (Matthew 26:42) James' condition is found on the lips of Paul as he promises to return to Ephesus, "if God wills" and from the mouth of believers when acceding to Paul's plans to return to Jerusalem, "the Lord's will be done." Peter even uses it when talking about suffering and doing good. All of which is to say that the *Conditio Jacobaea*, James condition was commonplace in early Christianity.²

But James wasn't trying to coin a phrase or mandate that all of our plans should be conditionally described with this expression if the Lord's willing. That isn't James' point. He is not talking about the words we must always use but about *the way we think* about the future, about our plans and intentions. "Think for a moment about the words "if the Lord wills." These

words should not be said as if God is sitting on a throne, like some Roman emperor sitting in the Coliseum, deciding to put his thumb up or down. Rather, James intends the expression "if the Lord wills" to be a decision to place our trust in the Lord and to live our lives according to God's directions. Living according to God's will involves an inward trust which leads to practical application.³ Again, an inward trust which leads to practical application.

James challenges us to **trust** that the future is ultimately in God's hands, that God is ultimately in charge and we are not. We **trust** God because life is ultimately a gift. It is, in fact, the loveliest truth in all of the world. Birth is a windfall. None of us earned our way into this world by what we did or did not do. It was given to us out of God's pure generosity and out of everlasting mercy. All that is around wasn't earned but given. That which we have are gifts of creation offered by the one who is ultimately Lord of all creation. God holds our destiny, our coming and our going in divine hands. We declare this truth about God by saying "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:15b) The whole conditional statement of trust turns on those two little letters---"if." If God created us and all that there is, then ultimately, all life is dependent on the will of God.

Of course, it is "if" that fuels our anxiety, isn't it? "What if"--is the enemy of trust. How many "What ifs" have cost you sleep this week? How many decisions do we make based on "What ifs?" "If" changes everything! The cure for uncertainty, according to James, seems to be the very height of uncertainty - "If." But it's what follows that makes all the difference. He says, "What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wills, we will do this and that.'" In other words, every "if" of your life and of mine, is in God's hands.

The right attitude for us to take is to not say, "If," and then be terrified. It's to say with utter confidence, "If the Lord wills, we'll show up to church next Sunday; we'll wake up tomorrow morning; we'll take another breath." The only "if" that matters is the "if" James tells us about in his condition. God, the God of the Bible, the generous God of all creation is the God of "if."

Then James adds this. If you trust in the future, you will trust in God's ways because trust leads to application. James is consistent with this message. Faith works, remember? If you trust in God's ways, you will trust in God's will for your life. God's will for your life is that you will be a doer of the word, not a hearer only. In this context, James puts it more blatantly. He says, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them." (James 4:17)

In this hard-sounding proverb at the end of the fourth chapter. James is writing about the sins of omission, rather than sins of commission. A teacher was giving her Sunday School children a lesson on sin. She wanted her kids to understand the difference between sins of COMMISSION and sins of OMISSION. "Sins of commission," the teacher explained, "are the sins we actually DO. Now, does anyone know what sins of omission are?" One little boy responded, "Those are the sins we want to do, but haven't gotten around to yet." Well, this little boy was not quite correct.

The sins of omission are the things God has commanded us to do that we fail to do. That's the overarching problem that James addresses throughout this letter. If you think about it, it connects with his thesis, "Be doers of the word, not hearers only..." (James 2:22) Hearing but not doing is the sin of omission, the sin of neglect. This particular form of sin comes in three basic varieties, three sins of neglect, when we don't love enough, we don't care enough and we don't give enough.

When don't love enough, James says we don't "keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (James 2:8) That's sin.

When we don't care enough. If someone is without clothes and daily food and you say, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:16) James says that's sin.

And greed is too. When we don't give enough, when we "have hoarded wealth in the last days" and "live on earth in luxury and self-indulgence" (James 5:3,5), when we lay up, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, treasure on earth rather than giving generously, and storing up treasure in heaven, (Matthew 6:19-20) Do that and it is a sin, the sin of omission. All of this is what James is getting at when he says, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them." (James 4:17)

You can see why James has been called the Nike book of the Bible. James wants us to "just do it." It is as much his condition as his condition. That is to say, if the Jacobean condition is, "If the Lord is willing" and it is, then the condition of using those words, is to "just do it!"

The dominant feature of the Letter of James is the direct connection between our faith in God and our actions. We are called to bear witness to our trust in God because that trust in God always leads to action.

It is why he asks the question, "What is your life?" So, what is your life? How might you answer that this day? Do you find yourself trusting abundant generosity God? Does that trust encourage you to use your gifts

and graces to love your neighbor, care for the poor and give freely of your wealth? How might you answer?

Remember, "What is your life?" is the question we all must answer, every day of our life. I hope your answer includes "If the Lord's willing" because it is a way to live with trust in a generous, benevolent God and an opportunity to put that trust in action. Why? Because James says that is the way Faith Works.

Oh yes, we will hear more about Faith Works next week, "if the Lord's willing..."

¹ Garrett, T. M. (2016). The Message to the Merchants in James 4:13-17 and Its Relevance for Today. *Journal Of Theological Interpretation*, 10(2), 299-315.

² Johnson, Luke Timothy. The Letter James. Anchor Bible Commentary. 1995. Page296-297.

³ Bryson, H. T. (1986). What Is Your Life? James 4:13-17. *The Theological Educator*, 3460-62.