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Title: Faith Works: Cares

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Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Matthew 7:7-11](#)

Text: [James 5:12-18](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



We are coming to the end of FaithWorks, a sermon series on the book of James. I swear. Oops. I'm not supposed to swear. I learned that growing up, although that was about bad words which some of you...most of you know. Some of you might even confess to saying them. But James says the same thing that I heard growing

up, "Don't swear" but he isn't talking about those four-letter curse words that you learned on the school bus and earned you a taste of soap. He is talking about making an oath, swearing in the name of God. He says, "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath...." (James 5:12a).

James would not want me to say, "As God is my witness, FaithWorks ends today" even though I just said it and even though it is true. James says, "Don't use God to warrant your truthfulness." That kind of language can get you in trouble. People might think poorly of you. So, keep it simple, straightforward and honest. "... let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation." (James 5:12b)

I don't want to be judged so let me try again. "Yes, today FaithWorks ends." That might be good news for some of you. "Boy, Randy, I thought you'd never get through this book! Disappointing for others. "Wow Randy, I'm really into this little book that six weeks ago, I couldn't even find in my Bible." With that sampling of quotes last week, welcome to my world as your pastor.

"Yes," today is the end of FaithWorks. My yes is yes because James, writing to church folk like you and me, wants us to be open and honest in our communication with each other. That's who Christians are, who we are supposed to be when we are together as the church. It is how we care for one another. How about you? Is your yes a yes? And your no, a no?

To this challenge to authentic, honest speech, James asks a number of questions. I thought about a participation exercise in worship using these questions. We could, by a show of hands, ask James' questions. You could raise your hand as your yes, keep it down as your no. But maybe we shouldn't. It might be awkward because some of the questions James asks are hard.

He starts this way. "Are any among you suffering?" (James 5:13a) Yes or no? Think carefully so that your yes is yes and your no is no. When it comes to hardness, this is a medium hard question, don't you think? It all has to do with just how you define suffering, whether it is the hard day sort of suffering of daily living or the life-threatening, darkness that overwhelms the human spirit and threatens your very breath. My suffering might be a walk in the park compared to your suffering. My suffering might be "oh, it's nothing" compared to your heartache. Still, pain is pain, suffering is suffering.

"Are any cheerful?" (James 5:13c) That's an easier question, isn't it? Are any cheerful? Yes or no? It not hard to make your yes, yes or no nor no. It's an "if you're happy and you know it" kind of church question. I wonder if that's where the song came from because James says if you are cheerful, you should sing songs of praise. It's kind of a song of praise. "If you're happy and you know it, show your hands." No, that's not the way it goes but you get point.

Are any among you sick? Yes or no? That question isn't too hard either. OR is it? Just what sort of sick are we talking about because, again, there is sick and there is *sick*. There is I'm fighting for my life sick and there is, I sure wish this cold would go away sick. I wouldn't want my struggle with my sinuses to be compared to someone's battle with cancer. Yes or no gets a little harder when you think of it that way.

There is one more subject but James doesn't ask it as a question. He doesn't ask, "Are any among you sinners? Yes or no?" He knows the answer is "yes" so he simply says, "...confess your sins to one another." (James 5:16a)

I thought about that as another possible participation exercise in worship. I thought at this point, we could pause, find a partner and you could, "*just do it.*" That's what we've been saying about James. It is the "Nike letter" of the bible. To James' challenge to confess to one another, we could "just do it" and confess. Just so you know that I'm not completely reckless in leading our church, I sought the counsel of a few trusted advisors. One said, "Randy, I don't think that will work." "Really, why?" "It will take too much time."

He might have a point although I think that there might be a few, just one or two of you, who might think that it would be uncomfortable. After all, you don't want to know what a miserable sinner the person sitting next to you is. But of course, they don't want to know about you either.

What's all this about? By now, you should know the answer. James says, "This is the way FaithWorks." It is why he wrote this letter and it says a lot that James ends this letter as a final challenge to the church. Maybe you didn't pick that up. You wouldn't necessarily, looking at bits and pieces of the letter over the past six weeks. But James ends his letter by using, for the first time, the word church. "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church..." (James 5:14) That's not insignificant. James has sharpened his focus from individual behavior to behavior within the church. "Just do it" is now about the church. He is making this point. "The church cares for one another when we are straightforward and honest, authentically sharing our sin, trouble, and sickness." That's his final message.

Too often, we have this ideal picture of what the early church looked like as if they were all happy and joyful without a problem or care in the world except for waiting for the return of Jesus. The picture that scripture paints is just the opposite. They were communities just like ours filled with sin, trouble, and sickness. There were challenges in their families, marriages that were in trouble, teenagers with problems, parents who were failing. There were challenges with friends, envy, gossip, and pride. There were workplace issues of integrity and equality. There were sicknesses, both physical and mental illness, just like we face. Whenever two or more are gathered in Jesus name, Christ isn't just present. There is sin, trouble, and sickness. When sin, trouble, and sickness are present, there is the opportunity to care for one another through confession, intercession, and healing.¹ James wants us to use these those three spiritual practices.

First, confess. "Confess your sins to one another." (James 5:16). We are all sinners. This is our human condition. You and I share this in common; we are sinners. There is only one way to get beyond our sin, and that is to name it and claim it. Confession is naming our sin in community and even though we don't partner up because it would take too long and because it would be terribly awkward, one of the reasons to be here is to name and claim your sin, ask for forgiveness and experience the support of one another as we mutually name sin and ask for forgiveness. Worship is always confessional, even if it is done collectively in the pastoral prayer and the Lord's Prayer when we say, "forgive us our sins..."

But for James, confession isn't just about sin. It is for troubles and sickness. It too is present every time we gather. It is why he asks, "Is anyone suffering? Is anyone happy? Is anyone sick?" James believes that to be the church, you have to be honest and straightforward, authentically sharing what is going on. We come together to share one another's joys and sorrows, to encourage one another when life is challenging, to rejoice when joyful. To be part of the church is a commitment not just to hear but to share. James says, faith doesn't work alone; it's not effective going solo. You can't survive the trials and challenges of life in isolation. We need each other to share the burden.

Many years ago, a Quaker theologian and teacher at Earlham College in Richmond Elton Trueblood talked about it this way when reflecting on this passage. He told a story about the day he was driving to some destination. He lived and taught in a time when cars were not as dependable and roads not as passable. He came across three men trying to push their disabled car up a hill and off the road. It was raining and muddy. Trueblood tried to decide whether to stop and get disheveled or to press on. Finally, his more generous impulses won out and he did stop. The older man got in the car and his two sons plus Trueblood pushed the car and eventually got it off to the side of the road. When the father got out of the car, he took Dr. Trueblood's hand and said, "I am very glad you came along. You had just enough strength, added to ours, to make the thing go." Trueblood reflected upon those words as he drove on down the road. "There are so many people trying to get their load over the hill," he thought. "We have just enough strength--when added to their own--to make the thing go."²

This is what James wants us to understand. We need each other because of the size of our troubles, sickness and sin are too great to bear them alone. Faith works together, cares for one another, helps to shoulder the burdens to help each other and it happens when we confess sins, troubles, and suffering.

Confession is followed by intercession. We intercede for one another when we pray for each other. James says, "If anyone is suffering. Pray. If anyone is sick. Pray. Confess your sins and pray for one another." If you have ever known that people are praying for you, you will know how powerful this is.

One of the first members of our congregation was a woman in her eighties named Ruth. She joined because earlier in her life, when she was a young adult, Ruth and her husband helped start a church in Illinois. After the first year, both Ruth and our congregation moved to a nursing home, Coventry Village. She lived a couple of more years and I would see her weekly, not in

worship, but in a Bible study that I led at the retirement home. Each time I would visit her, as I prepared to leave, she would say, "I want you to know that every day, I pray for you and our church." She could no longer be physically active or even present weekly in worship. There were many things she could no longer do. But she could intercede. And I would always say, "That is the very best thing that you could do."

James wants us to know that this is one of the very best things that we can do to care for one another. Prayer is shown to have incredible, positive benefits of support. It's isn't just vertical, it is horizontal. It stretches out through the community and offers incredible strength. That's not just anecdotal; it is well documented in both medical and mental health journals. Prayer works and James is correct when he says, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." (James 5:16b)

Confession and intercession lead to the third practice, healing. He says, "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14) It is hard for us, given our 21st century understanding of medicine, to fully understand the context of illness in the first century and the isolation that many experiences because of disease. At its best, the idea of anointing with oil seems more like a massage at the local spa.

This passage from James is helpful as it reveals that the practice of the early church was rooted in not just common practice but also the tradition of Jesus. Olive oil was in the first century widely used for medicinal purposes. Do you remember what the Good Samaritan does when he finds the battered man? He pours oil on his wound. Jesus instructed his disciples when going out, two by two, to use it. He was saying, take medicine, take oil. For Jesus, there wasn't a great gap between physical and spiritual healing. They must happen together which is why Jesus said, "Go in peace...your faith has made you well." James then would say that healing is not magic. It doesn't replace medicine. It is not the same as curing. It is mystical and relationship, requiring the touch of community and the power of prayer. They must happen together. ³

I like the story Tony Campolo tells to connect the two. It is about being in a church in Oregon where he was asked to pray for a man who had cancer. Campolo prayed boldly for the man's healing. That next week he got a telephone call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." Campolo thought when he heard her use the past tense verb that his cancer had been eradicated! But before he says anything, she said: "He died."

Campolo felt terrible. But she continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into the church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. But after you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him.

Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing." And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed." ⁴

Authentic healing is the work of Christ, who is the great physician. I am aware that this seems like an odd subject to some. And, yet, there it is, in the scripture. It is why James says "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up." (James 5:15) It has at least two meanings. When Jesus healed, he would sometimes say, "Rise up and walk." There is another meaning: *the Lord will raise them up* may also refer to the resurrection, which is, through the lens of faith is our ultimate healing. It is why James add: "pray for one another, so that you may be healed." (James 5:16b) It is how we care for one another.

With that, we come to an end but I hope and pray that it's not the end for you. The sermon series maybe be finished, but the work of faith isn't over. James provides us with valuable information about how we are to live our lives so I am going to take James challenge to pray for you. I'm going to pray that you "just do it," pray that you will live your life as a "doer of the word, not a hearer only." Why? You know... because James says that is the way FaithWorks.

¹ To Make the Wounded Whole, Kenneth Carter @dayone.org

² Ritz, Eric. The Tender-Touch, part 2. Retrieved by subscription at <https://sermons.com/sermon/the-tender-touch-part-2/1349219>

³ Johnson, Luke Timothy. Anchor Bible Commentary, The Letter of James. Page 343.

⁴ <http://fmeffree.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/James-5-13-16.pdf>