

## ***Showing Our Faith by Our Works***

**James 2: 14-26**

**First Presbyterian Church  
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**Gerrit Scott**

Last week, I was talking to a friend about hurricane relief. I said, “I’m not really much good at helping you with home repairs. But if you tell me how you’re feeling about your damage, I’d be happy to write a paragraph about it for you!” Well, God took me up on my little joke. Brian Sleeth, the Director of the Christian Outreach Center, was going to preach for us this week. But the demands of getting the three Purple Cow stores up and running, as well as the Outreach Center, just gave him no margin to prepare. I did a sermon on this passage a few years ago, so here we go with a re-working of that message.

When Brian chose this passage from James several weeks ago, he could not have known that we would all have spent a week coping with a hurricane. We’ve had our own dwellings and families to take care of. It’s amazing how much energy it takes to do all your normal life when you’re running your house on generator cords. And then there’ve been others to help. Our church volunteers, both adult and youth, have been cleaning yards, sawing trees, or just checking in our members with prayer and encouragement. Later in the week, we sent teams down with supplies, cash and manpower to the eastern part of the state. We’ll be sending folks for weeks to come.

We get it that you prove your faith by what you do. In fact, that’s one of the joys of living in Louisiana. People rise to the occasion in natural disasters. Everyone gets friendlier. We make connections. We lend tools and beds, generators and food. We want to help, and we do. One of the joys of being part of the body of Christ is the interconnectedness we have with each other. Last week I heard from people all over the country and even across the ocean. So many people are praying for us. We’re not alone in this struggle.

So as we take up James' bracing words, we can do it knowing we're good and tired this morning from a week spent interconnected with a community all working together to get life restored. We've been *living* our faith. And that makes worship all the sweeter.

James declared, *Faith apart from works is dead*. Faith without deeds, faith without integrity, faith without being aware of others, faith without living in the real world is not worth much to the people around us.

James approaches his brother Jesus in ability to paint an illustration that sinks right to the heart of the matter in only a few vivid words. "Suppose," he says, "A brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to him, 'Go in peace, be warm and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" Faith that is sentiment not backed by real action is a gooey, smarmy spread of *nothing*.

If he were writing today, James might say, "Suppose one of you is suffering a loss. And the loneliness has his mind so scrambled he can't even think what to do next. If one of you says, 'Now, if you need anything, if there's anything I can do, just call,' what good is it?" People in grief, in shock, in loneliness, in distress can't figure out what they need and then decide who to call and what to ask for. "If you need anything..." is a phrase I use when I want to wish someone well but don't know what to do and want to make myself feel better. Faith that matters considers the person in need long enough to determine what I can do to be of use in this situation. And then does it. It may be leaving the person alone; it may be running an errand; it may be praying; it may be staying all night. But faith that is alive acts in deeds that are real. This church has been living that out in an overflowing way this past week.

So, this James guy gets right to the point. Growing up with Jesus in your household might cause you to be that way. In our guts, we know that he's right. There really can be no separation between faith and works, between commitment and expression. Real belief issues forth in real action. Living *in* faith generates the living *out* of love.

Let's take a brief excursion into how this might play out in your soul

and conversations in the coming days. If you are a Christian who believes that human life is sacred from the moment of conception, you have been vigorously told, since Thursday, that you are a bad person. That is to say, if you watch, read or listen to any news at all, then you've experienced how a determined attempt has been made to shame you. All joy that our society might finally recognize that life in a womb is a human life, an individual life inside another's life, has been dampened by the fury that "my body, my choice" has not prevailed in Texas. I want to encourage you not to accept that shaming. Don't go quiet. Don't hide. Joyfully, jubilantly, insistently affirm the truth.

Let me be clear about why I bring this up. I make it a rule not to speak from the pulpit about specific political issues. I don't think that's my calling as a preacher and teacher of Christ's church. However, I'm very clear that my calling is to present a view of the world and humanity that arises from Scripture. That worldview results in particular morality and ethics. My vocation is to express those values as clearly and relevantly as possible. A crucial part of teaching is comparing and contrasting. We don't understand what something is unless we also know what it is not. There exist worldviews and values that are hostile to historic Christian faith. We need to see the contrast so we can avoid the destructive consequences to which these ethics lead.

God is the author of life. Out of eternal love, the Triune God brought forth the world and in particular made humanity male and female in his image. He designed us to participate in bringing forth new life through a relationship of sacred union. Scripture is clear that the being in a womb is a unique human person. "You knit me together in my mother's womb" declares Psalm 139. In a tender scene in Luke 1, Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Both women are pregnant. John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb when he senses the presence of the holy child within Mary. Both John and Jesus were particular persons alive within their mothers.

We are interdependent creatures. We always have our lives in relationship to others. A child within a womb is genetically complete, and her DNA is different than the mother's. Yet the child lives in dependence within the womb, just as she will live in dependence outside the womb a few months later. The fetus is not an appendage of the mother's body. She is a

person living within her mother's body. Genetically speaking, the 1-week-old embryo is the same person as the 1 week born baby.

Over and over I preach to you Paul's words, "You are not your own. You were bought with a price, so glorify God with your body." That's particular applicable here. To say "My body, my choice" is profoundly anti-Christian. To apply that wrong idea as a right to abort a person is absurd. It would be like my saying, "My house, my property." And then deciding that because a young child in my house is totally dependent on me so I can decide what to do with his life since all the property in the house is mine. We have such a much more affirming, joyful, sacred, loving view of human persons! Don't believe the lie that you are anti-woman and anti-freedom and shameful for believing that human life is life from the start. Don't let yourself be cowed into silence. Bear the disgrace, if it comes to that, for speaking, affirming and living in the truth! Guarding life from conception is the only way to health for our culture.

It is such faith that impels us to be fully pro-life. That's why we're engaged in ministries that span the age of children to the elderly. Every life matters and we support lives in all sizes, shapes, ages and stages. It's what we do because our faith is not dead. It's alive with the love of Jesus.

James tells us that faith without works is no faith. Not because we have to work to gain God's favor. But because real faith issues in loving action. Living Christian faith is not just signing onto a creed written on a piece of paper. It's not making a transaction with the Lord where I say "I believe in you so you give me eternal life." Faith looks at Christ in wonder and then says, "I see who you are. I know where you're going and I want to go with you. I'll ride with you. I'll let you take me wherever you wish." Faith follows Jesus into the world.

It's really a matter of remembering who our Lord is. Think of God We believe in the One who made the heavens and the earth in all their splendor. God set the stars blazing in their places. He created the plants and the animals who live in this incredible balance. We breathe in the sweet air and release carbon dioxide as waste; but then the leaves of the trees gather in the carbon dioxide as food and return sweet oxygen to us. This beauty sings out "Design!" And the very turning of the world, the passing from night to

day, and season to season as fragile life flourishes on this planet is a hymn of praise to the Creator. James described him, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (1: 17).

This great God, looking upon the world he has made is moved with love. He sees the results of our free will, and our ridiculous choices to try to be our own gods and all the evil that has resulted. His heart breaks. He does not remain aloof. Seeing our distress, he clothes himself in skin and comes to us in Jesus Christ. And Jesus walked among us, beholding our grief and weeping with us. Seeing the death in the world, he called forth Lazarus from the tomb as a sign of the eternal life he would create for all. Seeing our infirmities, he touched the broken and they were healed. This was a sign, a taste, of how the world will be restored. Seeing our lostness, he sought out the worst of the worst and gently led them home. Seeing our sin, he absorbed it into himself, returning forgiveness. Bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, he took the rage and anger of the world onto himself in the cross. He received the ocean of our sin and declared it but a drop in the bucket to his forgiveness.

Once you taste the goodness of God, you can’t keep that to yourself. When the love of God gets kindled inside us, it shines forth. Living faith pours through daily life. I’ve heard and seen this in action over and over in the past week. I’m overflowing with pride in how our members creatively, tirelessly, joyously find ways to care for each other. Faith is not dead at First Presbyterian. It’s alive and pulsing!

This fall, I think you’ll notice a ramping up of our *moving out* into the world to affirm the worth of every human life. Every week as part of worship, we will hear from our ministry and mission partners. We’ll hear ways to participate. Principal Britten shared this morning how we can help tutor students at Buchanan Elementary. Two weeks ago we heard of the mentoring program at Gardere. Soon we’ll hear from Terrence Carter, the new homeowner as we construct our seventh Habitat House. Our church will work side by side with a Terrence Carter. Terrence is a stroke survivor, the father of two sons, and a man of faith eager to partner with us. That all begins at the end of the month.

We’ll also be introducing our first capital campaign in over a decade.

Only it's not to raise funds for us. We will be seeking to raise \$1.5 million for building projects for four key mission partners. Imagine a whole over and above campaign to advance the gospel beyond us. To an expansion at Gardere Christian School, to a cottage for young women rescued from sex trafficking in Medellin, to building a high school and dorms in Uganda, to helping Church of the Resurrection purchase a permanent site in New Orleans. We'll be hearing from the leaders of each of these ministries as we prepare for *Building Up: Taking Missions to the Next Level*. You'll be hearing all the details over the coming weeks. But I am pins-and-needles excited that we're daring to dream of investing so significantly in mission beyond our walls.

We know there can be no split between faith and works. Works without faith are cut off from the source and fail to enter the grand vision of God's purpose for the world. Faith without expression in love is a narcissistic piety that would scare anybody with a brain away from the church. We serve a God of magnificent love, a Creator who passionately tends his creation. We serve a Christ of infinite forgiveness and tender mercy. There can be no split between church life and work life. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. And he is the savior of every aspect of life. I know you believe this because you live it! You've been serving him. In fact, worship this week is such a sweet relief after the stress and work of the last week. You're doing it. You're in the world with his love on your lips and his grace in your hands. Your faith is alive!