

On the Way with Saint James, (Part 7):
The Doer and the Dummy
James 1:22-25; 2:14-25; Proverbs 22:1-11, 22-25

Introduction

As a pastor, sometimes things are so serious. Over the years, I've realized that I need to laugh. In order to keep my sanity. To keep from thinking I'm too important.

Ellie and I enjoy stand-up comedians. The funniest things stand-up comedians say are funny because they are *true*.

James—as he coaches us for our pilgrim journey—is giving us a little bit of comic relief. Sometimes the best way to address something dead serious is to laugh about it, so you can actually talk about it.

The tough truth from James today is about what we say we believe, and what we do about it. Already we feel a little anxious. We're ready for comic relief.

James says, if I believe that if I'm a Christian, I'm **dumb**, **dead**, and **demonic** until the deed is **done**.

1. Dumb

James switches from a farming metaphor — (1:21) we are supposed to open up and humbly receive the word, which God plants in us — to a toilet metaphor (1:23).

To paraphrase: You're getting ready for a new day. You've got a 9:00 meeting in central Zurich. You need to look decent. You're ready to go. You take one last look in the mirror, because this is a big day, and this is a big meeting. You can't afford to have any mascara crumbling off your eyelashes, or shaving cream sitting on top of your ears.

Everything looks good. You grab your bag, and you head out the door. You walk to the Bahnhof, and all of a sudden, you don't remember which train you're supposed to take. You don't remember where your meeting is. You don't remember why this meeting is such a big deal. You don't even remember who you are, why you are at the Bahnhof, and why you are dressed so nicely. You walk back home, kick off your shoes, sit on the couch, turn on Netflix, you fall asleep. Your phone buzzes. It's your colleague—*Where ARE you!?* How could you *forget!?*

This is what it's like if we say we're Christians but don't do anything about it.

James is saying, "You don't have a neurological problem. This is a failure of identity. If you say you're a Christian, you're saying that you've been born from above, by the will of the Father! That you're the first fruits of a new creation (1:18)! That you've humbly received the word—received *Jesus*—planted into your heart and life! Have you forgotten that a plant is meant to grow into a

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fruitful tree? If you don't *do*, you're as dumb as someone who forgets what they look like the second after they look in the mirror."

It's silly. It's funny. But that's because it's true. You and I say "Oh, of course I'm a Christian. I'm not a Muslim, after all. I was baptized when I was 8 days old and I show up for church. Of course I'm a Christian. I've been on the church council. Or I'm a *pastor*, after all!"

But if we walk out of here just before 1pm, and we go back to our lives, and nothing has changed ... then we have forgotten what a Christian is and *does*.

And maybe some of you who are here and are a little skeptical of religion, you might look at our lives and ask: "What's the point, exactly, of all this religion? So many Christians don't seem to care about anything but themselves."

When we act like we've forgotten who we say we are, we're dummies. And James says: "Christian: don't be a dummy."

2. Dead

What else does James say?

Whenever an artist, comedian, or poet reflects on what their work is *really* about, do you know what they say? It's about death. The poet Billy Collins says all poems are really about death. The painter Mark Rothko said that all painting is really about death. Last year, a British comedian told a joke about death. Five minutes later, while he was still on stage, he died.

James is also concerned with death. That's what's behind his whole letter—even the comical bits. Because that dummy who forgets what a Christian *is* the minute he leaves church—James says that this kind of person's faith is dead.

Look at chapter 2. James says: imagine you have a person (2:15) who says "I am a Christian. I am a person of faith." But as soon as they get done saying it, another Christian—a brother or sister, James says!—comes up and says, "dear sister, dear brother, I have nothing left to eat, and nothing to wear. Can you help?"

and you say "Good luck with that" (2:16). James says: your faith is dead.

If you're alive with faith, you look up to the Heavenly Father who gave you birth, and you ask: "Father, show me someone—even someone here in my church—who I can love, serve, encourage, bless today. Help me recognize their need, whether it's physical, emotional, spiritual, or social, and find some way to meet some part of their need, because, after all, they are my sister and brother." If that is not the heartbeat of your life, then it's not a Christian life you've got. Your faith is dead and useless.

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3. Demonic

So James says that if your faith doesn't get to work, then you're dumb, and you're dead. And now he uses another mixture of humor and dead-seriousness. He says that if your faith doesn't get to work, it's demonic.

2:18: Oh, you believe in God, and you think that's all you need? That's interesting. Because you know what? Verse 19, even demons believe in God! Congratulations, you have the faith of a demon.

Demons can pass a test of Christian head-knowledge. But the Christian life is a journey of the heart, of the will, and of the actions. The destination is to become like Jesus Christ, full of active love for God and your neighbor.

And notice that James says a dumb, dead faith is actually *worse* than a demonic faith. Because, after all, when the demons remember that there is one God, and it's not them, *they shudder*. But dumb, dead, religious pretenders don't even *tremble* at the thought that Jesus is risen from the dead and he is Lord.

4. Done

So James says that if you are saying you're a Christian, and it is not your great desire to be like Jesus and serve like Jesus, then your faith is dumb, dead, and demonic. The only other possibility is that those good things, which (4:17) we *know* we are supposed to do, are **done**. Dumb, dead, demonic. Or **done**.

And he gives two examples. The first example is Abraham. *Mr. Faith*. Verse 23: Abraham believed God—believed God when God promised to bless him, and all the nations, through his family, and through his son, who would be born even though he and Sarah were way too old—and God counted that faith, that trust, as *righteousness*.

But James says that this true faith was **fulfilled** when Abraham offered Isaac back to God. He actually *did* believe God! God actually *did* count him righteous and save him because of this belief. And how do we know? Because Abraham turned around and did what God called him to do.¹

And then he uses a surprising—maybe even, again, a humorous— second example! Verse 25. *Just like Abraham*, this man you all admire so much, there was that pagan Canaanite prostitute

¹ Justification has two senses in the New Testament. Paul usually speaks of forensic justification: a courtroom declaration of "not guilty" and "righteous" based completely on God's grace through the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. James speaks of justification or being (2:24) "considered righteous" in a public demonstration sense: our good works don't save us, but our good works accompany saving, courtroom-scene justifying faith, and display to God and to the world that we are, in fact, real Christians. We shouldn't be too bothered by the apparent contradiction between James and Paul, because they are using the word "justification" differently for different things, and they are using the life of Abraham to illustrate these two different types of justification.

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Rahab. She didn't just *believe* God. She *demonstrated* her faith when she hid the Israelite spies in her apartment in the walls of Jericho (Joshua 2). It's like he's looking at the good Jewish Christians in the room and saying, "oh, you have faith, eh? But do you at least have the faith of a pagan prostitute?"

Abraham trusted God, and when he had the chance to obey God, his trust was put into action. Rahab heard rumors that the good God of Israel was moving among the nations with judgment and grace. She put her hope in that God. And she acted.

The German reformer Martin Luther helped the church re-discover that it is God's grace and love *apart from our good actions* that redeems us through Jesus. Only Jesus' good life is good enough, because it was perfect.

Know what else he said, though?

"It is impossible for faith to ever stop doing good. Faith does not even ask whether good works are necessary, because, before faith even gets around to asking that question, faith has already *done* those good works."

You know why?

Because faith is faith *in Jesus Christ*, the Lord and Savior. And people thought Jesus was dumb, dead, and demonic.

He healed people, and then he told them "don't tell anyone about this." They recognized he was God, and he said "don't say anything." Even when he was being tried and judged for what he said and did, he kept his mouth shut, and people were astonished.

You know why he remained "dumb" — speechless? Because he wanted the things he did to do the talking. On the cross he only said seven things, and they were all full of love. But the greatest act of love was done in the silence of his suffering—a gift for us, that saves us!

And Jesus didn't just say he trusted his father. He was obedient even to the point of death—and death on a Roman cross! And what a stunning truth: the person who is most alive with faith was most ready and willing even to die for other people! That's our Jesus!

When Jesus spoke about his coming death and resurrection, people said he was possessed by a demon (John 10:20). And when he did die, the demons thought that they had silenced God's Word. But if they laughed when Jesus died, just imagine how much they trembled when Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day!

Friends, the reason that we must trust *and obey* instead of being dummies who do nothing for anyone as soon as we leave church ...

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The reason we must be awake and responsive to the needs of one another, instead of having a dead faith ...

Is because God has not sent his Son into the world so that we can say “Ok, I acknowledge that this is true.” God sent Jesus to give us— in his life and death and resurrection—brand new and abundant life! A life of thoughts, words, and actions that are only explainable if someone has been raised from the dead; if someone has put the Spirit of resurrection in us.

Conclusion

The most dumb, dead, demonic and, frankly, *boring* thing in the world is to say you’re a Christian and not be transformed from one degree of Christ-like glory to the next. The most glorious and adventurous and exciting thing in the world is for you to be someone who so fully trusts Jesus that you can hardly believe the things you’re ready, willing, and glad to do with the new resurrection life you have in him.

Let’s not be dumb and dead, shall we, church? Let’s ask him: what should be done? And then let’s get whatever it is that he calls us to do *done*.