

Body Building Sermon Series
Dirty Hands - James 2:14-18
Sept. 22, 2024
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

There wasn't a lot of good things that came out of Covid, but one of them was a new appreciation for the importance of washing your hands. Do you remember all the signs that were plastered in restrooms right near the sink? It would show a detailed picture of the process. Turn on water. Get hands wet. Put soap on hands. Rub together vigorously while singing "Happy Birthday" or "Bohemian Rhapsody," depending on how dirty your hands were. Repeat this process ten times. Wipe hands on pants. The pandemic taught us the importance of having clean hands.

In our culture, clean hands are the marks of a well-kept life. After all, we all know what's next to godliness: chocolate iced donuts. Wait, who wrote this? No, it's cleanliness. Our society is obsessive about being clean, especially so after the pandemic. Not only does staying clean keep you germ-free, but it also keeps us from being associated with the opposite of clean. Webster's definition of "dirty" reads like Darth Vader's dating profile: "soiled, vile, contemptible, undesirable, and unpleasant." No one would want to be described by any of those words, would they?

Even in Jesus' time, there were dozens of purification rituals so that a person would not be "unclean." To be unclean was to be an outsider, to be barred from entry into the temple. No one wants to be thought of as unclean. And yet again, for our Body Building routine, James wants us to take the opposite approach. Instead of getting manicures and using hand lotion, James says we have to get them dirty. In fact, the dirtier our hands are the more that says about the authenticity of our faith.

I remember my uncle who was a mechanic used to tease me because he said I had "soft hands." His hands were always rough and stained with grease. You knew when he came home at night that he'd been working hard by the look of his hands. I was a journalist at the time, so I wasn't doing a lot of heavy lifting. My hands didn't have calluses, they didn't have dirt under the fingernails, there was no sign that my hands had been used for anything other than some vigorous typing.

One time he was teaching me to change the oil in my car. He explained where the oil plug was and told me to crawl under the car and loosen the plug. I looked at the garage floor and said, "Under THERE?!?" I did it, and when I climbed back out, he said, "Let me see your hands." So I stuck out my grimy, greasy, oiled-covered hands. He looked at them and smiled and said, "That's more like it! Now I can tell you've done some work."

Work, or deeds, is an important concept to James. He writes, "I by my works will show you my faith." Or, as the Message says it, "Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove." James preaches against the person who professes belief in Christ but then avoids situations where they might get their hands dirty serving him. According to James, true faith is something we show with our hands, not our mouths.

The Message asks, "Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?" Well, it should be. But how often in our world today do we hear all kinds of talk with no corresponding action? People will quote scripture or hold up the Bible or hit all the religious talking points, but then do nothing to live out what they profess to believe. It may make for good TV, but James is clear. That kind of behavior is outrageous nonsense.

This idea got James into trouble down through the centuries. In fact, the great reformer Martin Luther wanted to cut James right out of the Bible. He said it was a “right strawy epistle” because it seemed to contradict Paul’s teaching that we are saved through our faith alone. Paul taught that there’s nothing we can do to earn our salvation. That is a gift God has given to us. Luther charged that James drives us back to the law, that he claims we have to perform certain actions in order to be called righteous before God. Paul says faith, James says works.

So, who’s right? Well, they both are. Paul and James are arguing two sides of the same coin. Paul is arguing against the belief that we can somehow earn our way into Heaven. I once knew a contractor back in Indiana who was notorious for dumping waste into the local stream that ran by his housing development. Years later, he opened up a small golf course next to the subdivision and he let local pastors play for free. Do you think he was trying to make good with the Creator for polluting the creation? I don’t know if it worked, but I played a lot of free golf...to help this man absolve himself, of course. That’s what Paul is warning about, trying to buy our way into Heaven through good deeds.

But James makes an important point about the danger of the flipside of that equation: a faith without works. Call it head faith. Head faith is an intellectual assent to a certain set of doctrines and Christian teachings without any corresponding congruence in one’s actions. Head faith leads us to presume that simply knowing the right truth or holding the right position is enough to make us righteous, even if those beliefs are not lived out by our hands. James calls head faith a dead faith. The Greek word he uses for “dead” is “nekros,” the same word used to describe a corpse. Head faith uses all the Christian buzzwords, painted on billboards and spoken from fancy pulpits, but inside, it’s dead.

You probably know people who can do a good job of faking a live faith. I was waiting to get my hair cut one day and struck up a conversation with another person waiting. When people find out I’m a pastor they suddenly find the tops of their shoes incredibly interesting, or they turn into...Super Religious Person! That’s my least favorite superhero. “Let me tell you how faithful I am!” This lady responded that way. She was flipping through a travel magazine, and she turned to me and said, “You know, Pastor, I talk to the Lord regularly. In fact, God spoke to me and told me my fiancé and I should go to Hawaii for our honeymoon.” And I thought, “Really? What if God told you to go to Buffalo?” I know what she was trying to do; she was trying to show me how faithful she was. But I wanted to say to her, “Look, lady, my vote on your salvation doesn’t count, but do you want to impress me? Say ‘hello’ to the grocery store clerk with the tattoos and the piercings. Let someone cut in front of you in traffic. You want to impress me? Teach your children to respect people who are different from them. Go out of your way to do something nice for someone you don’t like. Give up something you want so someone else can have something they need. Don’t tell me how faithful you are; show me.”

What James is arguing for here is not that we can save ourselves by our deeds. We are saved by our faith in Christ. But a true faith, a faith that has been received as a gift from God, can never be kept silent. That kind of faith is so life-changing that it compels us to respond out of gratitude with elbow grease. Billy Graham says it this way: “There is no conflict between faith and works. In the Christian life they go together like inhaling and exhaling. Faith is taking the gospel in; works is taking the gospel out.” Or, as Jesus said in Matthew 7, “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.”

That’s what James calls us to do: Get in there and get our hands dirty doing the will of God. Don’t set your faith up on a shelf, taking it down only on Sunday morning and the

occasional crisis. Put it on and put it to use. God's gift to us is the knowledge that we have been reconciled to him through Jesus Christ, that we have been saved, not only FROM our sins, but FOR a life of service. That gift is so exhilarating, so liberating, that it should fill us to overflowing with gratitude, and that gratitude should spill out from us toward others.

As always, Jesus leads the way for us here. In John's gospel, as the disciples are gathering in the upper room for the Last Supper, Jesus wanted to leave them one lasting lesson about the importance of living out their faith. Did he preach a sermon to them? Did he give them a theological lecture? No. Instead, he bends down and, one by one, takes their feet, dirty and smelly from the day's walk, and he washes them clean. He doesn't just tell them what they need to do. They have asked him repeatedly what it means to follow him. He says, "As I have done for you, so you must do for others."

What has Jesus done for us? He hasn't washed our feet; he's washed our souls. He's given us the gift of forgiveness and mercy and eternal life. When we serve others, when we get our hands dirty, we're not only providing a service, we're providing a glimpse of the kin-dom of God, where everyone's hands are dirty from helping others. We can't all do everything, but each of us can do something. James says, "I will show you my faith by what I do."

Are we too concerned about staying clean that we'd rather just wish someone well in finding food than in feeding them? Would we rather say some nice words to someone in trouble rather than jumping into the fray with them so they know they're not alone? Our world doesn't just need speakers, it needs doers. What are you going to do this week to make a difference in someone's life? What are you going to do to show them that the kin-dom of God looks different – more loving, more hopeful, more generous - than this world? The next person you meet may be the one person who needs to see faith in action the most. So, what are you going to do? I recommend following the advice of St. Francis of Assisi, who said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."