

## Dead Faith

Doctors sometimes must tell people in a waiting room that their loved one is dead.

It's a pronouncement none of us ever wants to hear regarding a loved one, but when a person is declared dead, it's important that the declaration be correct. Rarely, but occasionally, a person who appears to have died, is not dead after all! He or she suddenly exhibits signs of life again, and some even recovered. So doctors want to get it right.

Because of medical life-support procedures, the cessation of heartbeat and breathing is sometimes not sufficient to say definitively that death has occurred. A stopped heart can sometimes be restarted, and breathing can be sustained by a ventilator.

Therefore, in cases when a person is sustained by life support but is believed to be otherwise dead, there's a standard that's been adopted by every state in our country: The patient is dead when there is no longer any functioning brain activity.

This is determined in two ways: first, by a detailed process that ascertains the person's inability to respond to voice, touch, pain or other stimuli; and second, by confirming that the brainstem no longer works to regulate the person's breathing. Thus, if removed from the ventilator, the person will not breathe on his or her own.

Dr. Cory Franklin, who was director of medical intensive care at Cook County Hospital in Chicago for more than 20 years, says, "No patient with a proper diagnosis of brain death ever has recovered to come off life support. Even with life support, no one has survived for a prolonged period, and when life support is withdrawn the heart invariably stops within minutes."

While physical death is not our subject, we've begun with the matter of setting criteria for when death occurs because, in a sense, that's what the biblical writer James is doing in our passage for today.

But he's not talking about dead people; he's talking about dead faith.

He gives the shorthand version of his criteria in verse 17: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." But in the preceding verses, he spells it out more clearly. James' criteria for dead faith includes:

- Acts of favoritism and partiality that result in dishonoring the poor within a Christian context (vv. 1-7).
- Failure to keep the whole law, but instead choosing bits and pieces. This practice does not honor the divine law behind them all: love your neighbor as yourself (vv. 8-12).
- Showing no mercy (v. 13).
- Paying lip service to one's faith and not expressing that faith through good works (vv. 14-17).

But all of that can be summed up in his declaration that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

These criteria for declaring faith dead aren’t given to help us make judgments about other people’s faith; rather, they are for *self-diagnosis*. With the help of the Holy Spirit, James’ signs of dead faith can enable us to resuscitate our faith when it is no longer moving.

“No longer moving” is exactly the right phrase, because unlike when a person physically dies and no longer communicates and no longer moves, people with dead faith keep right on talking, even when they’ve stopped “moving,” as it were.

The late Ethel Barrett, who was well-known for her skill in telling Bible stories to children, put it this way: “You have a tongue in your head and two tongues in your shoes, and no matter what the tongue in your head is saying, the tongues in your shoes tell what you’re doing and where you are going. And the awful truth is that the tongues in your shoes have the last word.”

And it was the psychologist Alfred Adler who said, “Trust only movement. Life happens at the level of events, not of words. Trust movement.” Thus, it follows that what we do tells more about the state of our faith than what we say. And that indeed is what James meant when he said, “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” Or, as it’s sometimes popularly put, we need to not only talk the talk but also walk the walk.

Some go off on a tangent to argue that what James says about good works seems to contradict what Paul said. In Romans, Paul declared, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (3:28). And in Galatians, he said it again: “And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law” (2:16).

But Paul was talking about when we were still in the darkness of sin, where faith plus nothing else but the grace of God brings us to new life. James is talking about *after* we’re in the new life, letting it die by not walking the talk. Or, as Barrett put it, coming to faith and then not expressing that faith in works “makes as much sense as whamming a ball over the back fence for a homer and then just standing there on home plate.”

Besides, Paul is as clear as James that works matter in the Christian life. Paul writes in Ephesians, “For we are what [God] has made us, *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (2:10).

The faith/works dichotomy in the New Testament does remind us, of course, that being a disciple of Jesus is not all about good works — there are important matters of repentance and belief involved — but faith and works belong together.

We might think of being in a rowboat with the word “faith” on one oar and the word “works” on the other oar. When we try rowing with either of the oars alone, the boat simply goes in a tight

circle, clockwise with one oar and counter clockwise with the other. To actually go anywhere, both oars need to be used together.

In case any of his readers don't know what James means by "works," he gives an example: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (vv. 15-16).

That's lip service, not good works.

For an example from our own time, consider a cartoon recently published. It showed a woman lying on a couch, obviously sick, and miserably so. The sink was stacked with dirty dishes. A huge basket of clothes to be washed sat nearby. Two dirty children were fighting in one corner, and in the other, a cat was licking milk from a puddle where a carton had split open. A smiling woman stood in the doorway, saying, "Well, Florence, if there is anything I can do to help, don't hesitate to let me know."

But let's not think of works only as addressing obvious needs that present themselves to us. James does not offer his criteria of dead faith as a general and theoretical document. Rather, he is responding to a specific scenario. He says in verse 2 that he's addressing what he's seen happen when a wealthy person comes "into your assembly" — that is, into his readers' specific church community.

He notes that the rich person may be offered a seat of honor, while a poor person is shunted to the side. In so doing, James says, the church members involved are dishonoring the poor. It's an attitude of favoritism. The good work, in this case, is to respond to even everyday situations in ways that reflect the values of Jesus.

This is where we need to remind ourselves that the cornerstone of the Christian faith is resurrection. Even dead faith can come alive again. Indeed, that was likely James' aim in issuing his criteria for knowing when faith was dead — so that believers would get moving and become doers as well.

There's an old fable about a man walking through a forest who saw a fox that had lost its legs. The man wondered how the fox lived. Then he saw a tiger come with game in its mouth. The tiger ate its fill and left the rest for the fox. The man saw the hand of God in this, and he decided that he would rest in a corner with full trust that the Lord would provide him with all he needed, just as he did for the fox.

So he did this for many days, but no one brought him anything. When he was almost at death's door, he heard a voice say, "O you who are in a path of error, open your eyes to the truth! Follow the example of the tiger and stop imitating the disabled fox."

As Paul said, in agreement with James, "We are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus

for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Because even a dead faith is subject to resurrection. Amen