

Eating Dirt

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. – James 2:15-17

Last year I read a newspaper story that continues to haunt me. It told how some of Haiti's poorest people could no longer afford food. To fill their bellies, they regularly turned to eating cookies made of dirt, salt and vegetable shortening. A 16-year-old girl said they give her a stomach ache and her nursing baby got colicky, but she either eats the cookies or nothing at all.

The first emotion that came to mind was horror, then shame at the way we waste food in this country when not so far away people must eat dirt to lessen the pangs of starvation. This was followed quickly by a desperate desire to somehow help these destitute souls.

As the image of this young mother dawdles in my mind, I realize there are ways we all can help her and others like her. Many humanitarian aid organizations provide food and other vital aid to destitute people in this country as well as others all around the world. Their appeals for money come to us on TV, in newspapers and magazines, in the mail, on the internet. At times we ignore the appeals because we're too busy, or because we've convinced ourselves we can't afford it, or because we get the idea those people could help themselves if they just tried, or maybe because we just don't care. Our excuses are legion. Too often we ignore the opportunity to help, as a quick thought that someone else will come to their aid flits through our minds, and we go about our business.

James, however, is quite clear in telling us that a quick goodwill thought is not enough as he explains that all talk and no action is incompatible with a growing faith. James isn't telling us that we must respond to every request for humanitarian aid or perform other types of good works because they help us earn favor or help us earn our salvation. Anything done for this purpose is worthless in God's sight because it is being done for selfish reasons. Jesus did all that was needed for the salvation of everyone when he suffered and died on the cross. Not one of us can do anything to add to this gift of salvation or to make ourselves look better in God's sight.

James is telling us that as the Holy Spirit makes faith take root in our hearts and we begin to understand God's will for us, a change comes into our lives. This change helps us meditate on the magnitude of our free gift of salvation, made ours through the suffering and death of Jesus. The Spirit motivates us to want to do God's will purely for the joy of pleasing God. When we see someone who needs help and we recognize this as an opportunity to serve, we are thanking God for the many ways he generously meets our physical and spiritual needs. As our faith grows stronger, our desire to serve grows also. This is the type of faith in action of which James speaks.

We can make a difference in this world. We can help those who are suffering, knowing God is pleased when we serve him in this way. Through our compassion, God uses us to bless those in need.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, forgive me for being slow to share the material blessings you have given me. In humble repentance and with thanksgiving for your abundant grace and mercy, I ask you to use me as your instrument to serve others. Let me recognize the opportunities for Christian service that you put in my path, and give me the desire to act on those opportunities. I come boldly to you in the name of Jesus, your Son and my Savior. Amen.

The devotion was written by Marilyn Miller, a staff minister in Houston, TX. The theological content was reviewed by Martin Luther College Professor David Sellnow.