

Just Do It!

September 2, 2018

James 1: 17-27

¹⁷ Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. ¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. ²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, upon going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. ²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.



Today we begin our new series, "A Faith That Works". For five weeks we will be spending time each Sunday - and hopefully during the week as well - wrestling with

the instructions that James gives us for living out our faith. To frame the series

and my message today, I want to begin with three overall characteristics of the book of James. First, James is a very practical book that gives concrete guidance in how to live the Christian faith. Second, James is very concise and to the point. Third, James uses metaphors and illustrations to make it easy to understand and to remember his points. The book of James is a 'catholic' or universal letter to the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations". It is not written to a specific church like Ephesus or Corinth, but to all the Christians living throughout the known world, making it applicable to many settings and situations. Also, important to note is the fact that James depends on Jesus more than any other New Testament author outside of the Gospels. James does not directly quote Jesus but weaves Jesus' teachings into his own. It is as if James has soaked up Jesus and His teachings so much that he simply reflects Jesus almost unconsciously in his letter. And, lastly, who wrote the book of James? The generally accepted author is James, Jesus' brother. James became a follower only after the resurrection. We also know from Acts 12 that he quickly assumed some leadership of the early church. With a little background on the book of James, we begin today. Let us pray...

Perhaps when you saw or read today's sermon title, you thought of this advertising campaign from 1988: Nike's famous "Just do it!" campaign. This was a wildly

successful campaign for Nike. The original ads and commercials featured athletes talking about their accomplishments and what they felt in those moments or seasons. These stories led viewers to think, "If they can do it, why can't it"? Nike received hundreds and hundreds of testimonials that shared the story of how they "just did it". I would guess you know the rest of that story.



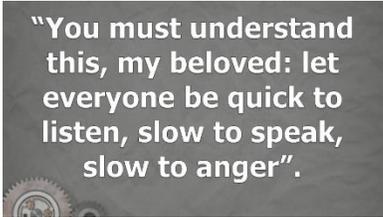
The idea of “just do it” is at the heart of the book of James. It is the idea that we latch onto when we think of Jesus calling twelve ordinary men who went out and changed the world. Jesus said, “Follow me” and they just did it. It is the idea that attracts us to Abraham and Moses and David and Esther and Mary and Paul and Barnabas and many, many others – these ordinary, everyday people that God used to accomplish great things. God picked them out, called them to action, and they too just did it. When we read and consider their stories, it leads us to think, “If they can do it, why can’t I”? This is the heart of James.



Just Do It!

Our passage for today begins with a gift from God. In verse 17, James writes, *“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change”*. The generous gifts that we receive from God leads us to live generous lives. This gift comes from a faithful God who remains steadfast and true through all that life brings. The call to righteous living that echoes throughout the book of James is lived out as our response to the gift of God’s constant assurance and presence. For James, and for us, the call to live a faithful and righteous life is not a burden but is our grateful response to our loving God.

In verse 19 we get into the practical advice that flows throughout the book of James. In this verse, James writes, *“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger”*. Here James is drawing upon some of the common Jewish wisdom teachings and upon ideas found throughout the Old Testament. For example, in

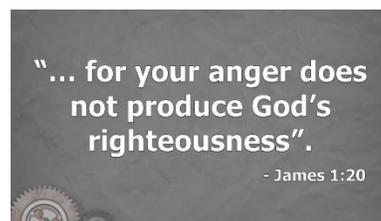


“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger”.

Proverbs 17:28 we read, *"Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent"*. In Sirach 5, a Jewish book of wisdom, we find these words, *"Be quick to hear, but deliberate in answering. If you know what to say, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand over your mouth"*. The theme of being quick to listen and slow to speak is common in the Jewish tradition. Modern phrases such as "God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason" continue to echo this idea. The graduate class that I just finished in mid-August primarily focused on how to be a good listener and how to understand what the other person is really trying to communicate.

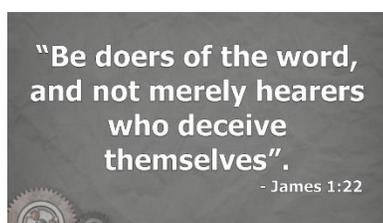
In general, being a good listener is highly thought of in our society. I think we all want to be thought of as good listeners. We may want to be thought of this way, but the reality is that most of us struggle with this. A big part of our struggle comes from this basic truth and honest confession: before the other person is even done speaking, we are thinking of our response. Anyone else guilty here? If this is the case, we do not always hear what the other person is saying, never mind picking up on what they are maybe really saying. And this often leads to problems with the "slow to speak" and "slow to anger" parts of this verse. Being slow to speak requires that we first listen well. This means that we really listen to what the other person is saying and we try and infer their real meaning. When we listen well and when we are slow to speak, then we are usually slow to anger as well. If we listen well and hear what the other person is really saying and if we understand their meaning, then our words will be well-spoken, and they will be not be words of anger.

James speaks next of why we, as Christians, should be slow to anger. In verse 20 he writes, *"for your anger does not produce God's righteousness"*. When we are angry, when we are allowing anger to be what drives our thoughts and words, then we are seldom producing God's



righteousness. What then, would be producing God's righteousness? For James, this would be to do what God requires of His people. Jesus uses the word "righteousness" in the same manner. Jesus encouraged His followers to practice a righteousness that produces behavior that is pleasing to God. Here we see a great example of how James draws on both the common Old Testament concept of righteousness – doing what God requires - and also on Jesus' interpretation as well – behaving in a way that is pleasing to God.

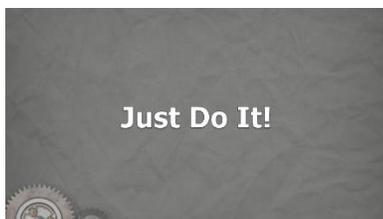
As we move into the balance of James 1, verses 22 through 27, we get to the practical application. In our key verse for today, verse 22, James cuts to the



chase, writing, *"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves"*. Do not just hear the Word of God. Actually listen to what it is saying, understand it, and apply it to your life. James goes on

to compare people who listen but do not do to people who look in the mirror and walk away forgetting what they look like. As children of God, when we look in the mirror we should see God's grace, love, peace, and joy that has been at work in and through our lives being reflected back at us. The inappropriate response would be to turn away and immediately forget the fullness of God that is in us. The appropriate response would be what I earlier spoke of - in response to God's good gifts, we would live our faith out in the world. We would express our

gratitude for all that God has done in our lives outwardly, by being a “doer” instead of just a “hearer”.

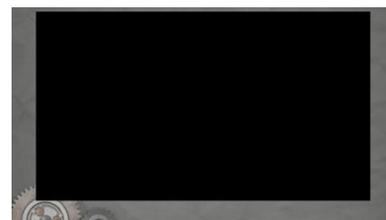


The Word of God that is heard and plants itself within us is a key to our being a “doer”. In verse 21 James encourages us to *“welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls”* and again in verse 25 where he implores us to *“look into the law of liberty and persevere”*. For the believer, the implanted word would be the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. When we heed the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, then we live into the power that saves our souls. Said another way, we are “putting on Christ”. In order to do this and to maintain a righteous walk of faith, we must do what James suggests. To do so, we must understand the word “law” as James is using it here. He is not referring to Old Testament Mosaic Law (with a capital “L”) or even to the common term “law” (lower case “l”) used by the Jews. The common term “law” would refer to the Torah or the collection of rules and regulations that guided the nation, the religion, and everyday life.

James has a different meaning here in this passage. For James, the law would connect back to the one who came to fulfill the Law. So, like James, we must also look to Christ to comprehend the law of Moses as it was interpreted, supplemented, fulfilled, and lived out by Jesus. This is the “perfect law of liberty” that James invites us to look into and to persevere in – to continue to look to Jesus over and over and over to understand what it means to live a life of righteousness. This will lead us to do as Jesus did, to be doers. The result? Using James’ words from the end of verse 25: *“they will be blessed in their*

doing". Here James is endorsing an active faith – not a "let go and let God" type of faith. This idea of an active faith ties back to the Bible Hall of Fame that I mentioned earlier – Abraham, Moses, Esther, David, Mary. These were people who heard God's call and responded with action, not words. They were people willing to relocate their family to a foreign land, willing to boldly confront the man in charge to gain his people's freedom, willing to risk one's life to save her people, willing to trust God and slay a giant, willing to courageously say "yes" to God's call to give birth to the Messiah. They were willing to "just do it" when they heard God's call to action. Last week you witnessed one of our own who heard God telling her to say "yes" when her pastor asked her to bring the message one Sunday. If you were here Sunday, you were blessed by Coleen's faithful response to God's call as she shared a message from Psalm 84 about trusting in God.

Over and over again the people of God have been and will continue to be blessed by listening to the call. In turn, they are a blessing to others because of their willingness to obey God, regardless of the risk, the cost, the sacrifice. I invite you to turn your attention to the screens for the story of a man from Africa who responded to God's call to love those in need. Please watch this story of how one man just did it.



I would have to say that there is a deep trust in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit that permeates this orphanage and the man who was willing to “just do it”. In



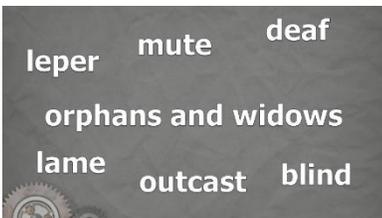
the language of James, this would be an example of the “*religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father*”. It is listening to the Word and the voice of the Holy Spirit, understanding what it is saying to you, and

doing what it says.

Verse 27 goes on to list two things that we are all called to do for God. The first is to “*care for orphans and widows in their distress*”. This does not literally mean to care for just the orphans and widows. To James’



audience, the phrase “*orphans and widows*” would have meant all people in



distress – the orphans, the widows, the mute, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the outcasts. In Psalm 68, God is described as the “*Father to the fatherless and defender of the widows*”. For the Jews, to care for the

helpless was to be intimate with the God who cares for the helpless. Following James’ line of thinking, the test of pure religion would be the degree to which we extend aid to the helpless in our world. Today the “helpless” would surely

include the widows and orphans but also the immigrants and others new to the community who are trying to adjust to a new life, the impoverished third-world dwellers, the handicapped, the mentally ill, and the



homeless. As a church and as individuals, we must ask ourselves, “How are we caring for these”?



Just Do It!

Our passage today concludes with a second mark of “pure religion”. James admonishes us to “*keep oneself unstained by the world*”. In our attempt to do this, we must once again turn our gaze back to Jesus, the one who lived as the perfect example. Jesus lived in the world but was not “of the world” – to use a common phrase. He lived a life that was pleasing to God. It was a life that kept away from the ungodly worldview and lifestyle that characterized most of humankind.

We know from experience how difficult it is to live in the world without being influenced by the world, without being stained by the world. You and I, we wrestle with temptation every day. And at times, we do sin. Yet we do try to remain unstained by the world. As followers of Jesus Christ we seek to emulate the perfecter of our faith, living a holy and righteous life. In doing so, our active and open faith becomes a blessing to others. We listen well, we understand, we speak words of love. We are slow to anger. We seek to persevere in our faith, peering deeply into God’s Word, finding guidance and direction for our lives. We look to the Word for examples of the faith and we find people like Abraham and Moses and Esther and David and Mary – people willing to hear God’s call and to respond with action. From their example, we realize that we too can just do it. We too can hear God’s voice and we can respond by being the hands and feet of God. In doing so, we do live out our faith, caring for the helpless, the lost, the broken. In this way, we are a blessing to others.

James says to you and to I, just do it. Just go out and live a faith that is alive and active and that engages the world. Be doers of the Word and not just hearers. Trust in the steadfast, unchanging, loving God and He will be present with us as we go. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) How will you, as a child of God, be a blessing to someone this week?
- 2) What “worldly” thing has been challenging you lately? Pray to God for the strength to withstand the temptation that you find in your life.
- 3) What is the “good gift” that God has given you? Are you a “doer” with this gift? If not, how can you be a doer?