

James 1:22-27

“But **be doers of the word**, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in the mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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.**

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.”

James 2:14-26

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 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? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, “*You have faith and I have works.*” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. 20 Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. 23 Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “**Abraham** believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 Likewise, was not **Rahab** the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, **so faith without works is also dead.**”

James emphasizes the importance of putting into practice what we hear. True faith expresses itself in action, particularly in acts of mercy to widows and orphans, to those who are poor and in need. We are to live what we believe. Luke

Johnson observes that, *“There is something deep inside human beings that leads them to presume that knowing the right truth or holding the right position is enough to make them righteous.”* In other words we mistakenly think if I say I believe something or I know something that is sufficient, regardless of whether I actually do it. The strong criticism Jesus had for the Pharisees and scribes was in part because (Matthew 23:3) *“They do not practice what they teach.”*

Rather than living what we believe and being doers of the word, some people have other standards for being a faithful follower of Jesus. Some people seem to think that as long as you say the right thing that is enough; that it doesn't matter whether your words and deeds actually match up with what Jesus says to do. I try to check the answering machine in the church office on Sunday morning and every now and then we'll get call from someone asking what translation of the Bible we use. That is usually a sign they are checking to see if I am using the one and only *English* version *they* believe is valid. I tell people I read a number of translations in preparing to preach because I think it is important to be accurate. Some people seem to think it is more important to use one English version of the Bible exclusively than it is to be accurate or to communicate effectively. Jesus is not looking for postures of piety; **Jesus wants to see lives transformed by the Holy Spirit that are striving to be consistent with our beliefs and what we've learned.**

Looking at The Boston Globe this morning there is a story about yielding when driving and how basically people in Massachusetts don't do it when they are coming onto a highway. Many of the examples were about folks getting on Route 3 and how they exchange mutual greetings when things don't go well. It reminded me of one of my favorite stories about a stressed-out woman on a busy street who is tailgating the man in the car in front of her. Suddenly, the light turns yellow, just in front of him. He does the honest thing, and stops at the crosswalk even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman hits the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration as she misses her chance to get through the intersection. As she is still in mid-rant, she hears a tap on her window and looks up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer orders her to exit her car with her hands up. He takes her to the police station where she is searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approaches the cell and opens the door.

She is escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer is waiting with her personal effects. He says, *"I'm very sorry for the mistake. You see I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping the guy off in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally I assumed you had stolen the car."*

James is saying to us, **you don't want folks to think you stole the car. We want to live what we know and believe, and be doers of the word. We want to be people who have integrity in what we say and do.** The movement of Jesus in the world is hindered by the negative witness of people who claim his name but not his life of love, healing, sharing, and caring for the poor. One of the most powerful witnesses of our missionaries is that they do seek to do these things.

Faith and Works are inseparable in following Jesus. Churches contain people today as they did then, who think their faith doesn't require any relationships or obligations to others. Twice as many Americans claim to be members of churches as actually participate in them. Many Christians run the risk of thinking that faith means nothing more than private, individual views. Even the commitment to gather with others to worship God regularly seems unnecessary to some people.

James says being a Doer of the Word takes perseverance. It is easy to get wrapped up in our busy lives, for our schedules to get so crowded that we rush from one thing to the next and we lose our patience, our perspective, and then we fail to persevere in doing what we say we know is most important. A seminary professor set up his preaching class in an unusual way. He scheduled his students to preach on the parable of the Good Samaritan so that each student would go, one at a time, from one classroom to another where he or she would preach a sermon. The professor gave some students 10 minutes to go from one room to the other; to others he allowed less time, forcing them to rush in order to meet the schedule. Each student, one at a time, had to walk down a corridor and pass by a poorly dressed man, who was deliberately planted there, obviously in need of some sort of aid.

The results were surprising, and offered a powerful lesson. The percentage of those good men and women who stopped to help was extremely low, especially for those who were under the pressure of a shorter time period. The tighter the schedule, the fewer seminarians who stopped to help the man. When the professor revealed his experiment, you can imagine the impact on that class of future spiritual leaders.

Rushing to preach a sermon on the Good Samaritan they had walked passed a man at the heart of the parable.

Since confession is good for the soul I will tell you that when I was driving home after visiting a church member at MA General Hospital. I was going down Route 3, listening to a CD by The Called Out Quartet and going over my sermon in my head including the story I just shared. Then I drove by at 55 miles an hour or so car pulled over to the side with its hazard lights on and the trunk open but I couldn't see anyone in the car so I just passed by. About 8 miles from the bridge I saw a garbage can in the breakdown lane and some other debris, and then I saw a woman walking back toward it from a pickup truck that was pulled over, but I was going so fast I didn't stop. All of a sudden I was hit with the realization, oh no, I just did what the priest and Levite did in the story of the Good Samaritan. When I turned on the next to last street to get to my house there was a car on the side of the road with New Jersey plates and a woman was standing outside the vehicle with a map. I slammed on my brakes and helped them find their way, thankful for a third chance to put my faith in God in action on one trip!

James is writing to people who consider themselves to be following God merely by agreeing with the statement "That God is one (James 2:19)." James says that isn't enough because *"even the demons believe – and shudder (2:19)."* **The New Testament teaches us that believing in God, the ability to quote the Bible, and recognizing who Jesus is – none of these means we have a saving, life-changing faith.** In truth, Satan and demons do all three. In Mark 1:24 when Jesus is beginning his ministry an unclean spirit says to him, *"I know who you are, the Holy One of God."* Throughout Mark's gospel, evil spirits recognize that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God (Mark 5:7). **Demons know the truth about God, but they've decided not to serve God, love Jesus, or follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. James implores us to persevere in doing what we know, living what we believe so that our life and actions match our talk.**

All Christians would agree we need to live what we believe. **The issue is whether our agreement leads to action.** For example, saying we are a Christian while doing things that Jesus would never do to another human being identifies us as a hearer who forgets rather than a doer who acts. We are to persevere in seeking to fulfill God's purpose for our life for the rest of our earthly journey. Being a Christian is kind of like being married - we are to persevere in being a doer of the word in good times and bad,

in sickness and in health, in times of prosperity and when we're just scraping by, as long as we live.

Finally when we persevere as doers of the word we will find we are blessed as we do so. There is no question we are saved by faith in Jesus and not by our own actions. Our acts of love and service are **the result, not the cause of our salvation, but the actions need to be there or else our faith may be merely a deception.**

Jesus, James, and Paul all agree our faith needs to be expressed by deeds of love. Paul writes in Galatians 5:6, **"The only thing that counts is faith working through love."**

Ralph Neighbour, pastor of Houston's West Memorial Baptist Church, relates his experience with a man named Jack. Jack had been the president of a large corporation, and when he got cancer, they ruthlessly dumped him. He went through his insurance, used his life savings, and had practically nothing left. Ralph recalled:

"I visited him with one of my deacons, who said,
*'Jack, you speak so openly about the brief life you have left.
I wonder if you have prepared for your life after death?'*

Jack stood up, livid with rage. *"You --- ---Christians. All you ever think about is what's going to happen to me after I die. If your God is so great, why doesn't he do something about the real problems of life?"* He went on to tell us he was leaving his wife penniless and his daughter without money for college. Then he ordered us out.

Days later my deacon insisted we go back. We did. He began by saying, *"Jack, I know I offended you. I humbly apologize. But I want you to know I've been working since then. Your first problem is where your family will live after you die. A realtor in our church has agreed to sell your house and give your wife his commission. I guarantee you that, if you'll permit us, some other men and I will make the house payments until it's sold."*

"I've contacted the owner of an apartment house down the street. He's offered your wife a three bedroom apartment plus free utilities and an \$850 – a month salary in return for her collecting rents and supervising plumbing and electrical repairs. The income from your house should pay for your daughter's college. I just want you to know your family will be well cared for."

Jack cried like a baby. He died shortly thereafter, so wrapped in pain he never accepted Jesus. But he experienced God's love even while rejecting the Lord. And his widow, touched by the practical love of caring Christians, came to believe in Jesus.

James says religion that is “pure and undefiled,” cares for the lowly – like orphans and widows. Concern and compassion for widows and orphans is seen as a sign of righteousness in the Old Testament and throughout the Bible. In Exodus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah to name a few – the Lord says over and over the same basic message - Zechariah 7:9-10 “9 Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; 10 do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another..”

Life on earth is not merely preparation for eternity; it is the beginning of eternal life. Eternal life begins here and now when we accept Christ and begin to live for Jesus. As someone said, **“We don’t want to be so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.”** As long as we’re on earth, God wants us to do something about the real problems of life – helping people find a place to stay, food to eat, a friend to talk to, and as we do what the Word says we will be blessed in our doing.

There is an old saying, *“If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”* In what ways can will you seek to “build your case” this week?

Faith without deeds is inadequate; it isn’t faith at all.

Faith with deeds changes lives, beginning with our own.