



## Being a Doer

St. James 1:22-27

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In our collect this morning we prayed:

“O Lord, from whom all good things come, grant to us your servants that by your holy inspiration we may think good thoughts and by your merciful guidance *put them into practice* through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”

“That we may think good thoughts and by your merciful guidance *put them into practice*.” How often do we get some great idea in our head, but never follow through on it? We tell ourselves that we’re going to go on a diet or start an exercise routine in the new year and forget about it within weeks. We tell ourselves that we’re going to break that bad habit, but we never make it past the first day. Maybe we make it a whole week before we give up. Sometimes we never actually follow through at all.

Several years ago I joined a health club. When I went in to sign up I noticed that they give all sorts of discounts if you’re willing to pay for six months or, better yet, a whole year in advance. But even if you’re not willing to pay for the whole year in one lump sum, the club didn’t offer any way to just come in and make monthly payment. I ask them, “I come in here three or four times a week – consistently – so why can’t I just make a payment each month?” They just told me the don’t do it that way. If you weren’t paying in advance, they required either direct and automatic debits from your chequing account each month or automatic monthly credit card billing. You see, the people in the health club industry know that ninety percent of the people that join stop coming within a month or two. In fact, of the people who join, an extremely high percentage never even come back after the first week! When I was lap swimming the pool always got crowded during January, but by February the crowds always disappeared and I was back to having a lane all to myself. The health clubs don’t

care so much whether or not you actually show up, they just want your money. In fact, after being a member of one for years, it’s pretty obvious that they oversell memberships big-time in the knowledge that most people will quickly drop out.

As human beings we’re very fickle. It’s part of our fallen human nature. We make grand and glorious plans, but we’re very prone to forgetting about those plans. And even though our fallen nature died with Christ on the cross and was buried with him in the tomb, we still have to fight the desire to go back and dig it up. And so even more disastrous than forgetting about the fitness plan or diet we planned to start after Christmas or the credit cards we never quite got around to cutting up, is our tendency to listen to what God has to say to us in the Holy Scriptures but never actually putting those words into action.

In a very practical sense this is what we’ll be looking at on Sunday nights starting next week. Maybe more than anything else, this is our biggest problem as Christians. It’s not a lack of knowing the right thing to do. It’s a lack of doing it. And so St. James addresses this in our Epistle lesson. Look with me at St. James 1:22:

**Become doers of the Word and not only hearers, fooling yourselves.** (James 1:22 CCNT).

Have you known people that seemed to know it all when it comes to the Christian life, but they never actually seemed to live it out? I think we all know people like that. They’re walking encyclopaedias of theology. They know every Bible verse from Sunday school that you’ve forgotten. They beat everyone at the Bible Edition of Trivial Pursuit. They read all the right books. But somehow all that head knowledge never quite makes it out into the way they live their lives. If you were to talk to their co-workers about them, you’d never know they were a Christian.

I remember years ago being in a Bible study at our church. It was part of a new members intake group, so there were mature Christians there and some who had just been baptised and hardly knew anything. One guy in our study group *always* had the right answers, but he consistently belittled and was verbally abusive to the people who gave the wrong answers. On one occasion we were looking at Colossians 3:20 (“Children,

obey your parents.”). One young girl who was a new Christian asked, “What if you’re parents tell you to do something you know is wrong?” And before anyone else could respond he jumped in saying, “Duh! St. Paul assumed that the people reading his letter had half a brain! Of course you shouldn’t obey your parents if they tell you to sin!” We were all taken aback and not sure how to respond to someone like that – it wasn’t what anyone expected to happen in a Bible study! But this is exactly what St. James is talking about. It’s not enough to know the right things – we’re obligated to do them too. The example of the guy in our Bible study is pretty extreme, but only so because even a non-Christian would consider what he did to be just plain anti-social behaviour. But most of us – probably all of us – do the same thing on a regular basis, cutting people down. We just wait to do it until they’re not around or until we’re in a group setting where we can get away with it.

Part of our problem is that we’re prone to relying too heavily on our emotions. Have you ever heard a really good sermon that got you fired up about something, but forgot about it before you got up Monday morning and had a chance to apply it to your life? How many times have you read a good book on growth as a Christian, but the longer you put off doing what it said, the less enthusiasm you had for it? St. James warns us against just this. If you’re enthused by the Word of God, do something about it NOW and take advantage of that enthusiasm, but by the same token, don’t let it die as your enthusiasm wanes. Remember that our faith has as much to do with the head as it does the heart!

But whatever the cause for our being hearers only and not doers, the real danger here is that we deceive or fool ourselves. It’s easy to fall into the trap of judging our spiritual maturity based on what we know instead of how we apply that knowledge and live it out. Knowing that I have to change the oil in my car every 5,000km is easy, but it takes some commitment to caring for my car to actually take it down to the shop and fork over the money to have it changed. I had a friend who never bothered to change his oil – he just dumped another quart into the engine whenever it got low. And he wondered why his cars only lasted two or three years while I was still driving mine after twenty years. It wasn’t that he didn’t know he

needed to actually *change* the oil, he just didn't care to make the commitment to do it. And so his car didn't take him very far. Just so, it's easy to talk about the ideal Christian life, but it takes real commitment to Christ to give up our old ways and live a Christ-like life that is pleasing to God. If you don't make the commitment and *do* in your life what you *know* in your head, your walk with God is going to be just like my friend's car – it won't get you anywhere.

The Apostle gives us an apt illustration of this:

**Whoever is a hearer of the Word and not a doer is like man who sees the face he was born with in a mirror – he sees himself, and goes away and immediately forgets what he looked like.** (James 1:23-24 CCNT)

James gives us this very apt illustration of a man looking in a mirror. It works. My guess would be that everyone here probably took at least a quick look in the mirror this morning. The mirror warns us if we've got bed-head or hat hair, bags under our eyes, or if we need a shave. The mirror helps you ladies to make sure your makeup goes in the right places and it helps us men make sure that we don't miss any spots as we shave. Our mirrors show us what we look like when we get up in the morning and help us as we do whatever it takes to look the way we really want to. The whole point of looking in the mirror is to make sure everything's okay, but St. James says that the man or woman who hears God's Word, but never applies it and never does anything about it is like a man who looks in the mirror, sees that he's got green bits of spinach stuck in his teeth, that his hair's a mess, and that he desperately needs a shave – that he sees all that, but then walks away and forgets how unkempt he looks.

You see, just as the bathroom mirror shows us everything that's physically wrong with us and helps us make it right, the Word of God shows us what's spiritually wrong with us and how to make it right.

You know how there are days when you've been out and about all day thinking nothing was wrong, but wondering why everyone was looking at you funny, and you get home only to pass a mirror and

see that somehow you only managed to shave only half your face that morning or you've got something really gross stuck in your teeth or hanging out of your nose. It happens to the best of us. There we were thinking everything was fine when there was really something terribly wrong. Well, God's Word should do the same thing to us spiritually. We go through life thinking that we're in good spiritual shape, thinking that we've got our spiritual hair perfectly combed and our spiritual teeth just bleached and regularly brushed – and then God jumps out at us from the pages of Scripture and shows us a giant spiritual wart right on the end of our spiritual nose – a big flaw that everyone else has been seeing for years, but was too embarrassed to tell us about – or worse yet, the same spiritual wart that everyone else has and that we've all come to see as perfectly normal.

Scripture shows us all of our sins and, worse yet, just when we're inclined to see those sins and start comparing ourselves to someone else who looks even worse than we do, Scripture holds up before us the example of Jesus Christ and says, "Don't compare yourself to other people, compare yourself to him." And we look at Christ, and no matter how good we look and no matter how much grooming we do, we know that we can never compare to the perfect image of the Word Incarnate.

The mirror of God's Word condemns us by showing us what we really are, but in doing that it also shows us what we really ought to be. It shows us what real righteousness is as it shows us God's holy Law and it shows us an ideal of righteousness as it holds before us the perfect life of Jesus Christ.

This is a pretty bad spot to be in, but God doesn't leave us condemned – his whole point is our redemption. The mirror of God's Word doesn't just show us to be the sinners that we are and it doesn't just show us the perfect image of Christ to which we can never fully live up. God's mirror also shows us what we can be. St. James goes on:

**But whoever looks into the perfect law of freedom and continues to do so, becoming not a hearer who forgets but a doer of deeds, will be made happy in the doing.** (James 1:25)

The key is in the *doing*. God doesn't leave us condemned because of our sins. When we make Christ our Lord and Master, God extends to us his grace. And so now we have Christ's perfect image in the mirror *and* the grace of God to help us along as we imitate the example. It's not that following Christ isn't hard work, but it's a work of love and one that eventually sets us free as we throw off the bondage of sin.

Have you ever tried doing something you'd never done before and without the instructions? Last week the movers took apart quite a few pieces of our furniture. The problem was that we didn't keep the assembly instructions for any of those pieces and the guys who had to put it together here in Courtenay weren't the ones who had taken it apart. They were only able to do it because they'd reassembled so much furniture in the past, that they were used to how it all works and could figure it out. But imagine how frustrating it would be to have all those pieces in front of you and no idea how they go together. Imagine putting together a puzzle with no box-top to look at to see what you're doing. Imagine trying to paint a painting with no knowledge of how the paint works or trying to play a musical instrument with no idea how it works or how to read music. How would you play the piano if you didn't know which key played C or which played an A – its not like they're labelled. How do you pick up a trumpet and get multiple notes out of three valves, or multiple notes from just four strings on a violin. In each case it's knowledge that sets us free. It's an intimate knowledge of his instrument and of music that sets the musician free. It's an intimate knowledge of colour, lighting, and shading that sets the painter free. And it's the intimate knowledge of God's Word and of the person of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, that set us free to be the people that God calls us to be. We need to stare long and hard into that mirror, looking into its pure surface and allowing the Holy Spirit to convince us of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

I think it's important to notice that James says that we "will be made happy [or blessed] in the doing." The blessing comes in the doing, not before. We're often prone to sit around waiting for God to give us what we need to do a task we know he wants us to do. Sometimes we

even make our waiting sound spiritual and saintly. We tell people we're waiting on the Lord's timing. Don't get me wrong, there are times when we need to wait on the Lord's timing, but when it comes to conforming to the image of Christ, the Nike slogan, "Just do it," is very applicable. Remember that God's already given us everything we need to do what he calls us to do. His grace is with us all the time and so is his Holy Spirit.

St. James drives his point home in closing as he gives us a very practical example:

**Whoever thinks he is religious and doesn't bridle his tongue but swindles his own heart, his religion is worthless.** (James 1:26)

I think those are Words that convict us all. How often do we forget that we're called to imitated Christ and end up letting our mouths run, saying stupid things, things that hurt others, things that blaspheme God, or even things that suggest we wouldn't know Jesus if he was sitting right next to us. James says it doesn't matter how religious you may be or think you are, if you're characterised by an unbridled tongue, you're only deceiving yourself. An unbridled tongue is just one example – it just happens to be one that should hit home for many of us – but he could have used any number of ungodly and un-Christ-like behaviours. If you call yourself religious – not matter how many Bible verses you have memorised or how much theology you know – if you're not a doer of that Word and if instead your life is characterised by sin and un-Christ-like attitudes and characteristics, you're only fooling yourself. Your religion is worthless. You'll be like the men Jesus described who will stand before his judgment seat pleading, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy and cast out demons in your name." Our Lord's response is a truly frightening one: "Depart from me. I never knew you." Jesus said that his followers would be known by their fruit and that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire.

And so in contrast James shows us that good fruit with the example of charity:

**Clean and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their affliction**

**and to keep oneself from becoming spotted by the world.** (James 1:27)

The Apostle makes a clear reference to the message God gave over and over through the Old Testament prophets: that worship, sacrifice, and all the externals of religion are worthless if the heart is not turned toward God. A heart turned toward God is a heart of compassion. It's a heart that looks out for others instead of trampling anyone who gets in the way of its own ambitions. A heart turned toward God doesn't make excuses, saying, "He's down and out because he's a sinner." It doesn't say, "Welfare is the government's job." It doesn't say, "I don't have enough." A heart turned toward God is one that says, "What can I give in the knowledge that my provision for those in need reflects my trust in the God who also provides for all of my own needs." It's a heart that humbly says, "How can I show the grace of God as one sinner to another."

Finally, a heart turned toward God is one that is totally committed to him. It doesn't flirt with sin. It doesn't flirt with the world. It doesn't peek around the corner at what the world does. It doesn't sit on the couch with a girlfriend or boyfriend pondering how far is too far. It doesn't ask how far I can bend the tax laws without actually breaking them. A heart turned toward God doesn't ask, "How far can I go without actually sinning" when it comes to the temptations of the world the flesh and the devil. A heart turned toward God seeks after righteousness. It doesn't skulk in the shadows on the fringe of darkness – it desires the glorious presence of God that dispels all darkness!

And so let us be reminded as we once again come to Our Lord's Table this morning, that what is offered here in the bread and wine is the sign and seal of his gracious promise of new life. Here we commemorate not just the death of the perfectly righteous Word Incarnate, but also his Resurrection and Ascension. Through his blood sin has been conquered and in knowing that he reigns as King we have confidence in our own victory. Here at his table we see him face to face. Let us look at his perfect image and the example he has set, knowing that his Father has given us the grace to conform to the Divine image we see staring back at us in the mirror.

Please pray with me: Again Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that all good things have their origin with you. It was your Holy Spirit that turned us to you in the first place when you regenerated our sinful hearts. Let us now not only be renewed in our minds as we study your written Word, but let us also be always mindful of the grace that you have given us, so that what we hear we will also do, as we conform ourselves to the image of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate. We ask this confident in your promises and in the name of that same Incarnate Word, your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.