

Be Doers of the Word

“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

James 1:22

James 1:17-27
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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After recently completing a sermon series on spiritual formation based on knowledge and practice gained in and through an understanding of Celtic spirituality, I'm beginning another sermon series, of sorts, this morning. This one is based on the assigned lectionary Epistle readings for the next five Sundays from the New Testament book of James.

James has become one of my favorite books in the Bible, primarily because it is more practical than it is theological. In fact, a case can easily be made that **James is more concerned with what we do as a community of faith, than what we believe as individual Christians.** As a moral discourse, steeped in the tradition of wisdom literature, his letter involves the **ethical implications** of what we understand to be our calling as followers of the ways of Jesus.

I like the style of this book as well. It is blunt and to the point, comprised of simple truisms and admonitions that everyone basically already knows. Things like, “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger” (1:19). James loves to state the obvious. In fact, if the entire Bible were like the book of James, we really wouldn't need preachers, for who needs a preacher merely to remind us of what we already know?

Therein lies the catch. *Knowing* and *doing* are two very different things, and that's the whole point that James is trying to make. In other words, **knowing what to do is not as important as doing what we know to do.** Or, as stated in what I think is one of the most important verses in the entire Bible, James 1:22, **“be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.”**

The Bible, then, is more than some kind of intellectual problem to try to solve, as fun as that is – especially as progressives who seek new ways of interpretation and understanding. The scriptures want more from us than simply to be understood. They long to be put into action. Saying that, it is still necessary to ponder, think, consider, reflect, dissect, even question and debate what we read and hear in the Bible. That's important and vital to the life and journey of faith. Ultimately, however, **what the Bible really wants us to do is get moving, get into the act, and live out the lessons in the text.** Though Jesus was often called “Teacher,” what he said was, “Follow me.” **Jesus was concerned with discipleship – the act of putting our faith into action – not just mere intellectual agreement.**

The remainder of verse 22 states, “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” **William Willimon**, former Chaplain at Duke University Chapel, once stated in a sermon: “

We deceive ourselves into thinking that we have done the faith when we have merely listened, reflected, pondered, agreed. What we profess is not as important as what we are able to perform. Beliefs must be embodied, enacted in order to be real.

Or, as I quoted in a sermon a few weeks ago, **we must turn our creeds into deeds.** That's where a typical Sunday morning worship service can actually get us into trouble. For it is a fact that a good deal of worship, particularly in the tradition of Presbyterianism, is non-participatory. Willimon rightfully states, "Church often becomes a place where we come, sit back and say, 'OK preacher, choir, organist, do it to me, fill me up.'" To put it another way, if a service of worship could be compared with going to see a theatrical play, for example, the folks in the pews often see themselves as the audience, with the pastor, liturgist, and musicians as the actors on the stage. Reflecting on this phenomenon, **Søren Kierkegaard**, an early 20th century existential theologian, switched this perception around. He reminds us that **in a service of worship the congregation is not the 'audience,' but rather God is the audience. The folks in the pews are the real actors, and the worship leaders are simply the directors.**

Therefore, the real test and mark of an effective church service of worship, and for a church school class for that matter, is not so much what we say here as it is with what we take with us and do beyond these walls the rest of the week. Perhaps the most scathing criticism that could be leveled against any congregation is the old line, "After all is said and done, more is said than done." That is why the Charge and Benediction at the close of worship often includes the admonition, "As this service of worship comes to a close, our service out in the world begins."

There's also wisdom that declares that what we say is often not as important as what we do. For instance, **we can't just tell our children and young people how to live good lives, we need to show them by being good role models.** As you parents of young children (now or in the past) are fully aware, we are being watched by them much more closely than we realize.

All this begs the question: **As a Christian, a follower of the ways of Jesus, what kind of example are you setting - at home, at work, at school, at church; with family, with friends, with complete strangers?** For me, it's the real-life syndrome of "practice what you preach." This is how we prevent hypocrisy, which is one of the main complaints leveled at Christians. It is also a big reason why more and more people are choosing to have nothing to do with organized religion. They're tired of religious folks saying one thing and doing another. Willimon writes:

The world is quite right in judging the truth of the gospel on the basis of the sort of lives the gospel is able to produce. **Do we really look like the God whom we praise here on Sunday morning?** Have our songs and prayers changed us, made us into that which we profess? That is the test, says James. Again, we already know that. We know that **any sermon that is 'seen,' in deeds of love and justice, is more effective than one that is only spoken and heard.**

Perhaps the best way I can summarize all of this is with the famous quote often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, **"Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words."** In the Book of James, we are reminded that the 'perfect law' – the law of love

that gives freedom and liberty – is something not so much to be studied, but rather lived out in and through our individual lives and the life of the congregation. **For in order for our faith to be real and authentic, it must be translated into deeds and actions.** That's what James means when he writes later in his letter, "Faith without works is dead." We'll look at that famous verse in a few weeks.

The issue before us now is this: What will you and I do with what we have said, sung, prayed and heard in this service of worship? How will we put our faith into action later this very day? What about tomorrow, when most of you will head back to work or dive into your usual Monday routine? What about the day after that?

There's a story about a couple, who following a service of worship one Sunday, walked to the exit and said to the preacher, "**Pastor, that was a wonderful sermon.**" **To which the preacher responded, "That remains to be seen."**

Words and beliefs, by themselves, while important, are never enough. Be doers of the word.

Amen.

Resource: William Willimon, Duke University. "Doers of the Word" sermon from 8-31-1997.