

Just Do It!

Part 1 of Sermon Series: *A Faith That Works*

a sermon based on

James 1:17-27

(with reference to Mark 7:1-23)

and delivered on

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Today, we begin a sermon series “A Faith That Works,” in which we’re going to focusing on the book of James. I’m not going to do it today, but quite frankly for years I’ve thought it would be something to let James preach to the church – that is to have everyone close their eyes while I read the book of James as the sermon.

Whereas so much of the New Testament helps us to understand what it is to be a Christian – James’ concern is that Christians act like Christians. But what does that mean?

Whereas Paul spent a lot of time correcting false teachings in the church, James is drawn to how what the church believes is manifested in the world. He sees in the church lifestyle choices that were not and are not befitting to those who have heard and believed the gospel.

What did he say in verses 19-21? “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. 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.”

He could have just stopped there. That’s where a lot of people stop with faith. Isn’t it? Just quit doing bad things? But even that wasn’t all that he had in mind.

Maybe I’m reading a bit too much of today’s Gospel message into what James is saying, but bear with me. In the Gospel reading today, what happened? The Pharisees complained to Jesus that the disciples weren’t following the prescribed practices – in particular they hadn’t washed their hands before eating. This wasn’t a concern for hygiene and their well-being – it was a purely ceremonial washing. In other words, the disciples weren’t following all the rules that “good” Jews should follow to show how good they are. But we Pharisees... we know better and we do... For shame...

It’s in this context that I wonder whether James’ instruction to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger isn’t directed at Christians who are getting a bit snotty with one another for things that have little to do with the Gospel. We see it in the greater Church today with all of our divisions over fine points of theology and even just political power within the church in how different groups govern themselves.

James reminds them – and us – that it’s not good enough to just hear the word – it’s not enough to just look like a Christian so that in that moment before you run out of the house you like what you see, but then forget that everyone else sees you from a different perspective.

When we look to the cross we look for forgiveness. Don’t we? We see Jesus’ love and quite frankly we limit his grace to forgiveness. Forgiveness is good. I like it especially when it’s for me. But...

Maybe this will help.

A Sunday School teacher was trying to teach her class about forgiveness and how we are forgiven through Jesus and that it’s what he does and not what we do. So, she asks – rhetorically (but you know how kids are) – she asks, rhetorically, “What do we have to do to be forgiven?”

Now, you’d think if there was an answer, maybe it would be, “We ask Jesus.” Right? Good answer. But not Tommy. Tommy raises his hand and waves it, “I know, I know.”

“Yes, Tommy.”

“Well, first, you gotta sin.”

When we limit our faith – our religion – to forgiveness and avoiding sin – it becomes very private. How have I been forgiven? What should I not be doing? What has been done to me that I need to forgive?

It can corrupt how we see God. If it's only about sin and forgiveness, then it is as if God looks at us either annoying sinners – or quiet pests. But that's not who God is.

God – the Father of lights as James says – is the source of every generous act of giving and every perfect gift comes from him and that “for his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would become a sort of first fruits of his creatures.” (Jas 1:18-18) That's good news!

God doesn't see you or me as annoyances that have to be managed – but as the first fruits (the best part) of his creatures. Forgiveness isn't the end. It's the beginning. Jesus didn't just die on the cross so that we could claim forgiveness. He rose from the grave so that we could live. So that we could LIVE. That's an active verb.

A passive faith concerned merely with avoiding sin (and “helping” others to do so by pointing out their flaws) is a worthless religion. Pure religion is to lift up. That's what Jesus did for us, so that's what we're called to do.

We're called to tend to those in need around us – not so that the church becomes some sort of social service agency. That may be our fear sometimes, that we might fall into the trap of trying to earn God's favor so that we even forget God when we go through the motions of “showing” how good we are. But that shouldn't keep us from acting.

Did you notice anything about how the Pharisees criticized Jesus in the Gospel passage today? They didn't go after him. They went after his disciples. “Why do your disciples not...?” (Mk 7:5) People noticed what Jesus' disciples did and didn't do. People still notice what Jesus' disciples do and don't do.

But it's not enough to keep from doing wrong things, or to focus all our energy in the public sphere to what each of us may consider sinful life choices. When we do – when Jesus' disciples do that – we show the world a God who just doesn't want to be annoyed – rather than a God who loves us and sees such potential that he would go to the cross to show us how precious we are.

We need to avoid sin. We need to be available to hold one another accountable in love. When all hell is breaking out around us we need (as the psalmist says) to be still and know the LORD. But the Father of lights is yearning for others to receive the perfect gift of hope and life that is Jesus Christ. So that when we act – when we do – we become the instrument of God's blessing.

If Tommy is right – and he sort of is – that the first thing that we need to do to be forgiven is to sin – the maybe we might just need less forgiveness. We might just need less forgiveness – not because doing good erases our sins – but because we will have less time to sin.

And then the man – the woman – the girl – the boy that we see in the mirror after our devotions or prayers will be the same man – the same woman – the same girl – the same boy – the same disciple of Jesus Christ that the world sees. And maybe by catching that glimpse of Jesus who sees potential rather than failure – possibility rather than annoyance – a blessing rather than a pest – those who receive God's generous gifts through us might themselves find life in him.

Let's be honest. Not one of us – not all of us together in this room – can fix all the problems in our neighborhoods – little less the world. It can feel overwhelming. But God isn't asking any of us to fix the world. He's not asking you or me to be the one to end poverty, or child abuse, or

racism and bigotry. He's not. He's inviting each of us – as the first fruits of his creatures – to be a part in making his new creation a reality, even when our particular part may seem small, just do it. AMEN.