

Doers Of The Word

James 1:17-27

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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.

In fulfillment of God's own purpose
God gave us birth by the word of truth,
so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures.

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.

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 a 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.

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I.

Today's Scripture reading from the first chapter of James, speaks to the transformative nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that we would become a kind of "first fruits" of the creation in fulfillment of God's own purpose in birthing us by the word of truth. What a great introductory line for a sermon, huh? Something to get all the heads in the room nodding together at the same time in the hope of building not only consensus, but momentum as well.

This morning, we being the 24th year of our lives together. I don't mind telling you at this point, after almost a quarter century with you, I have a very different understand of ministry than when we first began our journey. Which, I believe, is a good thing.

II.

All too often, however, and for too many people, unfortunately, religion is anything but a "good thing." Which is more than ironic, it is terribly sad. History is replete with examples, though; as is the news, both locally and globally. Where this reality hits me most, however, is when I speak to people who had one bad experience of religion at some point in their lives and simply never looked back, went back, or got back. I don't necessarily blame them for such a decision, but to give up so much based on relatively so very little seems, to me, a shame. My guess is, for most of these folks, the *practice* of religion never quite lived up to the *truth* of religion. True religion, as we are reminded by the author of James, is to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

III.

After all this time together, though, I can assure you that caring for orphans and widows is the easy part. Keeping oneself unstained by the world? Well, that is where things get a little tricky, don't they? One of the things I know for sure after these decades on the park is that *true* religion is very different than *real* religion.

While *true* religion is noble and a necessary guide to the life of faith, *real* religion requires us to put that faith into practice and, as such, is a much more formidable task. Worse, and I'm sure all of you will agree, at least as it regards the life of faith, practice seldom make perfect. The practice of our faith, admirable as it is, really only serves to help us be more forgiving of the imperfection of those around us and the world in which we all live, and, in final measure, more forgiving of our *own* imperfections. As such, the practice of one's faith is an invitation to receive God's grace.

IV.

Or, as we say in our church's mission statement: to *embrace* the grace. To which Lew Shepard likes to add, "that is in this place." The grace that is in this place on the Park, is as described in today text: quick to listen; slow to speak and slow to anger. A place which rids itself of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness and, instead, replaces it with a meekness which allows the word to be implanted in us, and which has the power to save our souls.

This is also a place which discourages and decries deception in order that we may look upon each other and, especially, ourselves with an honest and penetrating gaze which reminds us to bridle our tongues. More than anything, though, ours is a place that creates a space to be doers of the Word, and not simply hearers of the Word. A place not just to *receive* the Gospel with thanksgiving, but to also *respond* to the Gospel with generosity.

V.

When I first arrived in Canton and began to serve as the pastor this church, I very much wanted to transform this congregation into *Doers* of the *Word*. As I would often say in those early days, I don't care *what* we do, as long as we are doing *something*: some focus of our mission efforts, some bold initiative out in the community, some new program here in the congregation. I'm sure many ministers, new to a church, wish for much the same; and, I believe, most congregations expect as much. A fresh start, new energy and ideas, something to spark the spirit and rally the faithful. We certainly did all of that, and set an entirely new course for this church, the momentum of which leads us still today. Sometimes, though, after all these years, I pine for such a new wind of the Spirit to blow amongst us, and through me.

VI.

As I said at the start of this sermon, however, I have a very different understand of ministry than when we first began our journey. While the fierce gusts of a gale are often helpful, and even necessary, to set a new course for the ministry of a church, what keeps the church moving over time and through the years is more often a soft and gentle breeze. Ministry, I've come to decide, is about the *little* things; small seeds which keep getting planted every day and over the decades in every nook and cranny of the lives and hearts of a congregation and a community. A note, a call, a visit, a kind word, a thank you, a small encouragement, a meal provided, a modest idea in some sermon, a pat on the back, a hand to help one up, an abiding presence, a moral anchor, an offer of bolster for the body, a meditation for the mind, or simple safe-harbor for the soul. These generous acts of giving are what the author of James calls "every perfect gift."

VII.

While these perfect gifts and generous acts may flow through us and out to others, they originate from God, and come to us from above; if we will only allow them the freedom to flow and flourish amongst us. However, before we can allow them to do so, we must first recognize them; that is, we must *see* them.

This morning, I face a bit of a quandary. As I've studied and considered this passage, the Spirit of God has convicted me of a notion about which I cannot disabuse myself; though practical considerations are clearly shouting at me to do just that. Following today's service I will drive out to Brick Chapel to lead worship and to preach for their final worship service of the summer. On the occasions that I do such double duty, I endeavor to prepare *one* sermon that speaks sufficiently to *each* church. You can imagine I am well motivated to do so, as the time and effort required to prepare two distinct sermons in one week is a very daunting task, indeed.

VIII.

That fact notwithstanding, I believe you can tell, even if you've only been half paying attention, that the words I have for you this morning, are for your hearts, and yours alone. What I hope to say to the folks at Brick Chapel will be very different, as I cannot bring myself to ignore that I perceive their

congregation very much stands at a crossroads, and that this passage speaks directly to this moment in their lives together.

I've been preaching at Brick Chapel for 16 years; a sufficient length of time to afford me both a fond familiarity and a poignant perspective. What remains to be seen, though, is if such a labor will also afford me the privilege to speak to them, heart to heart, about the difference between continuing on as merely *hearers* of the word rather than *doers* of the word. That the good folks there endeavor to simply open their doors each summer is both a noble pursuit and a glorious victory; and, as such, is certainly sufficient by anyone's measure.

IX.

Time is marching on, however, and I fear that now is the occasion for them to begin to consider what their future may bring or, perhaps more likely, what kind of future they might help bring to others. Of course, this isn't the first time that I've had such thoughts, and I'm pretty sure there are others who see the elephant in the room just as plainly as I do. To be honest though, it has simply been easier for me to ignore it as well, consoling myself that it really isn't my place. After all, and strictly speaking, I'm *not* their pastor. I am, however, as close as they have and, in all probability, as close as they are going to get; at least for the foreseeable future, which is not so hard to foresee. So, I would ask for your prayers when, an hour from now, I do some plain-speaking, some truth-telling, and set their hands to the plow.

X.

What I hope to do, is to give them a task, a practice, and a discipline that you have helped to teach me oh these many years. I speak not of any bold initiative to help them invigorate their ministry. Rather, I intend on challenging them to consider how they might be a soft and gentle breeze which seeks to simply plant seeds in the lives and hearts of those friends and neighbors living in their neck of the woods. I will speak not of mission endeavors, or changes in worship, liturgy or governance. I will not set goals, impose deadlines or point to objectives which must be achieved. The truth is, there is no guide book to where they could go and no map to show the way; only a trail of breadcrumbs to be found and followed, or not.

XI.

I began today by speaking about the transformative nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that we would become a kind of “first fruits” of the creation in fulfillment of God’s own purpose in birthing us by the word of truth. Based on what I have seen and experienced in living and working among all you here at the Church on the Park these past 23 years, I believe such a transformation begins by *seeing* the light of God, without variation or shadow due to change, in each and everyone of God’s children; in our spouses and family, in our neighbors, in those who with whom we share the pews in those who act and live like us and, perhaps especially, in those who do not. For each of these people with whom we share our lives is a perfect gift come down from above, if we will only see them as such. Like you and I have learned to see each other here on the Park.

That is what it means to be Doers of the Word. And *that*, my friends, is the only *real* religion that will ever get all the heads in the room nodding together at the same time; building not only a consensus of spirit, but a momentum of hope as well. To gain so much based on relatively so very little seems, to me, to be nothing short of a miracle. May we here on the Park, and our sisters and brothers at Brick Chapel, be so blessed in our doing. Amen.