

Just Do It!

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James 1: 17-27

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Some of you read in my mid-week update via e-mail this week that the book of James is not often preached in the Presbyterian Church. Did you figure out why? Well, for starters, Christ is not really emphasized in the book of James, in fact Christ is only mentioned two times in the whole book. There is no mention of the cross—no mention of Jesus dying on the cross for our redemption, or of baptism, one of the two Sacraments in the PCUSA and there is no mention of grace. Wow! A great deal of the things we base our faith on is not even in this book we are studying today.

So, why was this book even included in the Bible? Well, once we take a good hard look at, specifically, this text for today, I think we will see why.

One of the reasons I like the book of James is that this book is a book of action-- It has a strong emphasis on works—on doing good things. We Presbyterians strongly believe, though, that our salvation comes to us by grace through faith, and not by our works. So are you beginning to see why James is not always the Presbyterian preachers choice of texts for sermons? Grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—those are the Protestant watchwords—not works alone.

It was the apostle Paul who wrote in Eph. 2:8 saying “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the results of work.*” Now, I may be getting myself into hot water here, but I believe sometimes we good Presbyterians focus so singly on this passage that we may at times throw out the importance of **doing** things. Just do it! —As the Nike ad claims.

However, it was that same apostle Paul who also wrote in Gal. 5:6 that “*The only thing that counts is faith working through love.*” This is where I think things begin to break down for us staunch Presbyterians. And why I believe the book of James is more than worthy to be included in our sacred texts.

As you probably know, in the Greek language—the original language of the New Testament—there were many different words for love. In English, we have only one word to describe love, whether it is the love we have for our husband or wife—a sexual love (*eros*), the love we have for our friends (*philos*), or the love we have for God and the love God has for us (*agape*).

The word Paul used for love when he wrote Galatians 5:6—*the only thing that counts is faith working through love*—was the word *agape*. Of the three Greek words used for love (*eros*, *philos* and *agape*), *agape* was the least common. *Agape* was used to speak of the unmerited love God has for us

and when it was used regarding human love, it was used in terms of selfless and self-giving love.

Agape love is the love we have not only for God and God for us, but it is the love we have for the poor, the widows and orphans, a self-giving, selfless love. And *that* is exactly what James was telling us to do.

James never said that our salvation comes to us solely by our works. He said that faith *without* works is dead. You can't separate genuine faith from charitable love—from agape.

It might be helpful for you to know that James wrote this letter to a very wealthy congregation. Most of us would not consider ourselves a wealthy congregation. In fact, just on Wednesday night the Session and I were speaking about how we were behind on budget and how are we going to make up the difference—where will this money come from?

However, when you put our congregation in perspective with the rest of the world, I think we can honestly say, that we are pretty well off. We have a beautiful church building, You pay me and three other staff people, and I don't know of any of you that go hungry days on end because you can't afford food. We have been blessed by God.

Our passage today begins by saying: *Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift is from above.* Think about that for a minute. We say and acknowledge all the time that all good gifts, that everything we are and have are gifts from God. But, look at that first part of verse 17. *Every generous act of giving is from above.* *OUR* acts of giving are even gifts from God. Have you ever thought of that before? God stirs our faith (also a gift, you know), gives us wisdom, and stirs our hearts with the gift of wanting to give to others.

The desire to give to others—to help those in need, the orphans and widows, the hungry or homeless people we encounter—that desire was placed in our hearts by God. The wisdom to understand this is also a gift from God.

Once we understand that point, we come to where James says: *Be doers of the word, and not just hearers who deceive themselves.* Doing is the grateful response to the gift of wisdom and faith.

Be doers of the word, not just hearers who deceive themselves. It is sad, but true, that if you are not doing the word, then you probably have not really heard the word, and you are deceiving yourself. You may have thought you heard it quite clearly. You may have thought you understood it quite well. But if you are not doing the word, James says you are mistaken—not bad, not necessarily a hypocrite, just in need of more understanding.

Our worship services here are a lot about hearing. We do not get many opportunities to be doers here on Sunday mornings. There is one time, however, when we can be doers—that is during the offering. Whether your offering ends up getting used for a mission project or paying the light bill, you

are being a doer of the word and responding to and acknowledging the gift from God of a generous act of giving.

However, James seems to get right in our business and might say... *If your being here today, if your offering today has no impact on how you live Monday through Saturday, then you haven't really heard. Your hearing was in vain.*

Giving should not be out of obligation or guilt, Our faith and love from God is a free gift—but when we give—to the church or to others, whether it is a monetary gift or the gift of our time, we give because we have had a real encounter with God, and real encounters with God transforms us. Real encounters with the divine allows Christ to open our ears so we don't have to be just hearers of the word but doers as well.

Do your beliefs shape your actions? I know most of us can tell others how Jesus comforts us and gives us peace in our lives when the world seems to be turned upside down. But how does our faith influence the way we shop or relate to co-workers or friends and our family? Does your faith influence the way you vote, or what movies you see? Do you connect what you believe with how you behave?

Well, James give us the answer on how we are to connect what we hear with what we do. It's going to take a little explaining, though and I'm sorry to drop all these Greek vocabulary lessons in your lap today. But, understanding some of these individual words from the language in which they were written is very helpful at times.

I want you to look at verses 26 and 27. James says, *If any think they are religious... then he goes on to say, 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.*

And here comes the Greek lesson—The word *religion* in Greek is translated *worship*, and *worship* is translated to *latrea*—from which we derive our word *liturgy*—which actually means *the work of the people*—That is why you, and not just me, say the prayers and the affirmations each week. The liturgy we have in our worship service is yours and my work. Liturgy is the way we worship God.

James says, *Now this is true worship*—not that you come here each Sunday morning and say the prayers and sing the songs and listen to me, but **true** worship is caring for orphans and widows and keeping yourself unstained by the world. True worship is sharing that *agape* love with people you meet every day, not *just* here on Sunday mornings.

You know, as I got to this point in my sermon writing, I began to realize, myself, why a lot of preachers don't use this text. This is a hard lesson to hear! But the good news, my friends, is that we have Christ. We have Christ to help us with our hearing and doing disabilities . . . if we are willing.

So what do you think? Shall we open our ears? Shall we really hear and be moved to do, or will we hear in vain? God has a lot to say to us today and every day.

I pray that we have the courage and grace to hear *and* to do. Amen.