

JUST DO IT.**JAMES 1:19-27**

If you made a New Year's resolution to drop a few pounds or work out more, you'll enjoy this story. Have you ever heard of the athleisure fashion sector? It includes fancy athletic clothing with brand names like Lululemon, Lucy, and Lorna Jane; Gap Body, Athleta, and Nike along with assorted footwear and accessories. The size of the market for athleisure products grew 5% each year between 2009 and 2014, from \$54 billion to \$68 billion. Americans are wearing this stuff everywhere, including to the office. According to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, the market might hit \$100 billion by the end of 2020. But there's a strange twist in this growth of athleisure. Most people are just wearing it; they're not actually working out in it. The same article continues, "For many wearers, the athletic part of athleisure remains aspirational. [For example], sales of yoga clothes increased 10 times as much as [actual] participation in yoga classes over the 2009 to 2014 span." Apparently we like the workout look; we just don't like the workout lifestyle or the workout practices. The word "hypocrisy" comes to mind. Pretending to do or to be something you are not.

Last week we began a new message series on the New Testament book of James entitled *Tell It Like It Is: The "In Your Face" Message of James*. James just had this rather abrupt, blunt, and brusque communication style that might be described today as decidedly "in your face." No need to ask James for his opinion on much of anything! Greek scholars tell us you'll find 50 commands – 50 words in the imperative mood - in his letter. Most likely, James was the half-brother of Jesus Himself. He probably did not believe in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God or as the Messiah, however, until after the resurrection. But then he quickly became one of early Christianity's most prominent leaders in his role as the pastor of the very first local church – the church in the city of Jerusalem – for some 20 years or more. He likely died as a martyr for his faith in Jesus.

If there is one unifying, overarching theme in the book of James it would have to be spiritual maturity. James wanted his hearers or readers to grow up spiritually and become the men and women God wanted and needed them to be. He had several themes – different manifestations of spiritual maturity - that he'd zero in on here and there throughout his letter. For example, last week the theme was about never giving up. Mature followers of Jesus find a way to persevere, endure, and be patient especially in handling life's troubles. Today, we're going to consider a section in James that addresses how we can know if our faith in Jesus is genuine or authentic. James had no use or excuse for hypocrisy when it came to following Jesus! Let's look at 1:19-27 in the book of James today to get at that issue. James presents...

ONE OBVIOUS CONCLUSION ABOUT FOLLOWING JESUS

You can boil it down to one very simple, powerful truth. It's more about what I do than what I believe. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (Jam. 1:22 NIV) A different translation helps, "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." (Jam. 1:22 NLT) We all understand the difference between saying you believe something is true, and

then living in such a way that denies it. We call it hypocrisy and look down on it. That verse underlines the truth that if you say you're a follower of Jesus, it will show up in your everyday behavior. It's sometimes referred to as the Nike verse because it sounds like the Nike marketing slogan: "Just do it." Don't just talk about exercise. Don't just buy athleisure clothes. Don't just read about getting in shape. Don't just wear running shoes to look good. Don't just think about moving your body. Go out and do it.

James made more or less the same point when it comes to following Jesus. Either it changes how you live or it doesn't. Either it affects how you think and approach your life every day or it doesn't. Just do it, because when you do it – it's obviously authentic and genuine. Because we're sinful human beings, Christians have problems with being hypocrites. Some people have deceived themselves into thinking they're born again or saved when they're not. Jesus Himself addressed that very issue. "Not everyone who calls out to me, "Lord! Lord!" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.'" (Mt. 7:21 NLT)

Personally, I believe that's been a real problem in the American version of Christianity. We've put a lot of stress on just believing certain things about Jesus – that He's the Son of God, that He died on the cross, that He rose from the dead – and de-emphasized the need for a life that's being transformed. American Christians usually equate praying to receive Jesus as your Savior, or getting baptized, or going forward, or being confirmed with being a follower of Jesus. "Oh, I did that! Check!" We've been so careful to emphasize the biblical truth that you can't be saved through your being good or doing good, we've kind of thrown the baby out with the bath water! The result has been we now have people who claim to follow Jesus who refuse to identify with a local church, or who are content to perpetuate an immoral lifestyle, or whose value system is no different than someone who has no use for Jesus. But we believe the right stuff, by golly! James reminded us any kind of faith without outward evidence is a worthless faith.

If we're capable of fooling ourselves about whether we're even truly born again by the Spirit of God, we can also fool ourselves about what it means to be spiritual. It's quite possible for you and me to think we're spiritually mature when we're not. James made it plain obedience – actually doing what God says to do – is both an evidence of spiritual maturity and produces that maturity. But not everyone got that. It's kind of comforting to know James faced the same problem of "nominal Christians" – people who are Christian in name only – that we do today. Apparently, he was well acquainted with people who were only too happy to come and listen to teaching from God's Word, but who went away without it affecting their attitudes or actions very much.

It's more about what I do than what I believe. Or, to put it another way, James said it's more about practicing God's Word than hearing or reading it. James referred to the "word" a lot in these verses and also refers to it as the "the perfect law." What was he talking about? The Bible. Scripture. But in James' case, it would have been just the Old Testament supplemented by stories of what Jesus had said and taught. The New Testament hadn't been written yet. But James made it clear merely listening to or hearing God's Word was insufficient. Obviously, photographs weren't available in the

first century and most people had limited access even to things like mirrors which were typically made out of metal not glass. So forgetting how you looked was much easier in James' day than it is in ours! But James used the analogy of looking in a mirror. Being acquainted with God's Word, but failing to obey it was like looking in a mirror to see if your face was clean and hair combed, but then promptly forgetting whatever the mirror revealed. The purpose of looking in a mirror is personal examination that prompts you to do something. Take a bath! Brush your hair! Otherwise, just looking in a mirror is a waste of time. Likewise, the purpose of reading, or hearing, or knowing God's Word is personal examination that will prompt you to do something about your life. If what I hear at church or in a Bible study isn't lived out at home, at work, or at school, there's no value in having heard it at all.

Now James said or implied some things about God's Word here we would do well to remember when it comes to following Jesus. First, it contains God's revealed will for how to live my life. Even though his emphasis was on doing rather than just hearing, James never said it's unimportant to hear or read God's Word. How else are we to become aware of what God wants? The Bible says, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." (Rom. 10:17 NLT) So, by all means, read and meditate on Scripture for yourself, attend Bible studies, and listen to messages based on God's Word. Second, God's Word is perfect. James said, "But if you look carefully into the perfect law..." (Jam. 1:25 NLT) Why is the law perfect? God's Word was given by a perfect God, so it also is perfect. It can't be bettered or improved upon. It enables you and me to become who God has called you and me to be if we will do what it says.

Third, it requires a teachable spirit to do me in any good. "Humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts.... But if you look carefully into the perfect law." (Jam. 1:21, 25 NLT) When you read the Bible, do you have a receptive or a resistant attitude? When you have a teachable spirit, you're humble enough to learn; you're able to face the truth about some things in your life without getting all resentful or angry; you're not blinded by your own prejudices; you're not making all sort of lame excuses why you should stay the way you are. Spiritual maturity means facing yourself honestly and making changes on the basis of what's revealed. Perhaps you like to mark up your Bible – underline verses, make notes in the margins. Well and good. But has your Bible marked you? Have you allowed it to change you?

Fourth, God's Word sets me free. "But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it." (Jam.1:25 NLT) How can a law set me free? A law restricts my freedom, doesn't it? Yes and no. There's a law that says you must drive on the right side of the road. In one sense it restricts you, but it actually sets you free to avoid absolute chaos and bodily injury. By restricting your freedom in some ways, God's laws open up to us a far greater, and more genuine freedom. Jesus had the same thought when He said, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (Jo. 8:31-32 NLT)

Fifth, it results in blessing if I obey God's Word. "But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it." (Jam.1:25 NLT) Blessing in this life or blessing when we all get to Heaven? Both! Maybe James had in mind the parable Jesus told about the farmer who planted seed. Do you remember what happened to the seed (the Word) that fell on good soil? Jesus said, "The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" (Mt. 13:23 NLT) The final test of whether you've truly been born again by the Spirit of God is fruit – a good crop – a great harvest. What is that? A transformed character, a changed life, a whole new value system, love for lost people, love for God's people, sharing our possessions, doing good to others, and a whole lot more.

When the late Eugene Peterson, a well-known pastor and author, was 35, he bought running shoes and began enjoying long-distance running. Soon he was competing in 10K races every month or so, and then a marathon once a year. By then he was subscribing to and reading three running magazines! Then Peterson pulled a muscle and couldn't run for a couple of months. Those magazines were still all over the house, but he never opened one of them. The moment he resumed running, though, he started reading again. That's when Peterson realized that his reading was an extension of something he was a part of. He was reading for companionship, affirmation, and to deepen his experience of running. If he wasn't running, there was nothing to deepen. The parallel to reading Scripture is striking. If I'm not living in active response to the living God, reading about Him or His greatness or salvation won't hold my interest for long. The most important question when you're reading the Bible isn't "What does this mean," but "What can I obey?" Simple obedience will open up our lives to the Bible more quickly than any number of Bible studies, dictionaries, and concordances.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? There's one obvious conclusion according to James. It's more about what I do than what I believe. Or, to put it another way, it's more about practicing God's Word than hearing or reading it. What does that look like? James doesn't leaving us guessing. He provides...

THREE OBVIOUS EXAMPLES OF FOLLOWING JESUS.

The word "religion" can have a negative connotation. For example, I've heard people say, "Christianity is a relationship not a religion." They suggest religion – even the practice of Christianity - can become just a collection of formal rituals, outward ceremonies, or visible practices that don't affect a person in any positive or meaningful way. Certainly that can be true. By the same token, religion can simply refer to whatever is visible or observable about your faith. When you come to this worship service, or attend a Bible class, or read your Bible, or put your offering in the plate, or sing a song of praise, you are performing an act that is religious by definition. It would be kind of hard to follow Jesus if you didn't engage in at least some visible, outward acts. James used a word that's translated into English as "religion", but he meant it in a positive way. "If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling

yourself, and your religion is worthless. Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.” (Jam. 1:26-27 NLT) Maybe he added those words “pure and undefiled” to “religion” to distinguish between worthwhile religion and worthless religion.

Whatever the case, James provided three very concrete, very practical examples of what following Jesus looked like – three visible, outward, “religious” acts that point to or underline your faith and mine as being authentic and genuine. I don’t think he was trying to say these three examples were the only possible examples. Instead, they were most likely three examples that James felt the people to whom he sent this letter happened to be struggling with at the time. Here’s what’s interesting. His three examples of “good religion” - positive religion - are still very relevant 21 centuries later.

First example: I control my speech especially when I’m angry. “Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.... If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.” (James 1:19-20, 26 NLT) Anger was a problem back in James’ day. It’s still a big problem today. What does the Bible say about anger here and elsewhere? Well, it says anger is inevitable. All of us will get angry over something sooner or later. It says human anger is dangerous at best and sinful at worst. Human anger never produces anything that glorifies God or builds up people. So one way to visibly, outwardly demonstrate you’re a follower of Jesus – to be religious in a positive, godly way - is to surrender your anger (and especially the hurtful, harsh words that usually go with it) to God so He can control it. What does surrendered or controlled anger look like? James said it’s quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to even get angry in the first place. He had a whole lot more to say about the tongue when he got to chapter three, but - clearly - if you can’t control what comes out of your mouth when you’re angry, you’re spiritually immature. The ability to control it especially when you’re angry is one mark of spiritual maturity. That’s good religion! It’s an obvious example of following Jesus genuinely and authentically.

Second example: I show compassion to the marginalized. “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress.” (Jam. 1:27 NLT) Apparently there were many poor people in the church at Jerusalem because elsewhere in the New Testament we’re told Paul, another great Christian leader, raised a large offering from other churches to alleviate the suffering of economically needy Jerusalem believers. James wasn’t restricting our compassion to just orphans and widows. Instead, he meant genuine spiritual maturity is revealed when we show practical compassion by meeting the needs of desperately needy people who have been marginalized by society for some reason. After all, here is how Scripture describes God Himself, “Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy.” (Ps. 68:5 NLT) Yes, some people are just lazy when jobs are available. Yes, some people try to take advantage of the welfare system. Yes, some people are here in our country illegally. But if all you can do is make excuses why you shouldn’t be compassionate, you’re spiritually immature. One visible, outward way to

demonstrate you follow Jesus is to show marginalized people compassion. That's good religion! It's an obvious example of following Jesus genuinely and authentically.

Third example: I practice a godly lifestyle. “So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.... Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.” (James 1:21, 27 NLT) It's not clear what James had in mind when he spoke of getting rid of filth, evil, and corruption, but I've got to think he had in mind all the character and morality stuff laid out in the Mosaic Law and the teachings of Jesus. The Ten Commandments: no idols, no stealing, no lying, no sexual immorality, no coveting, for example. The fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. If your lifestyle and value system looks pretty much the same as people who have no use for God and could care less about Jesus, something is terribly wrong. At best, you're spiritually immature. At worst, you're not really a follower of Jesus at all. One visible, outward way to demonstrate you follow Jesus is to practice godly living. That's good religion! It's an obvious example of following Jesus genuinely and authentically.

Robert Kupferschmid was an 81-year old with no flying experience. However, one day due to a tragic emergency, he was forced to fly an airplane. Some years ago now, he and his 52-year-old pilot friend, Wesley Sickle, were flying from Indianapolis to Muncie, Indiana. During the flight, Wesley, the pilot, slumped over and died at the controls. The Cessna 172 single-engine plane began to nose-dive and Robert grabbed the controls. He got on the radio and pleaded for help. Nearby were two pilots who heard the call. The town of Mount Comfort provided the closest airport, so those two pilots gave Robert a steady stream of instructions on how to climb, how to steer—and the scariest part—how to land the plane. Emergency vehicles were called out and ready for what seemed like an approaching disaster. Witnesses said the plane's nose nudged the center line and bounced a few times before the tail hit the ground. The Cessna ended up in a patch of soggy grass next to the runway. Amazingly, Robert Kupferschmid wasn't injured. Why? He listened and followed those instructions as if his life depended on it. Because it did. What if he'd had no instructions? What if he had instructions, but decided he didn't have to follow them after all?

God has given human beings instructions. It's called the Bible. What if He'd never given us the Bible? Disaster. What if He gave us the Bible, and we read or listened to what it said, but then decided we didn't need to do what it said? That might be an even greater disaster. What if we listened and followed the Bible's instructions as if our lives depended on it? Because, you see, it does.