

JUST DO IT!

Jas 1:19-27

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.26.03

One evening, as the story goes, a husband and wife were discussing the possibility of taking a trip to the Holy Land. The husband said, “Wouldn’t it be fantastic to go to the Holy Land and stand and shout the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai?” His wife replied, “It would be better if we stayed home and kept them.”

In 1988, Nike introduced a campaign slogan that is now displayed in the Americana Exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum. The slogan— “Just Do It.”—has become a part of American history.¹ “Just Do It.”—expresses the essence of Jas 1:19-27, where James says, “Be doers of the word, not merely hearers” (v. 22). “Just Do It.” Far better than traveling to Mount Sinai and proclaiming from its peak the Ten Commandments, it is to stay home and put the Ten Commandments into practice.

Turn with me and let’s read together Jas 1:19-27.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹Therefore 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.

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But 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.

²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion 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 (Jas 1:19-27, NRSV).

In v. 18, the verse prior to the passage we read, James speaks of God’s “word of truth.” This “word of truth” by which we are reborn as Christians, the “implanted word” that has

¹<http://www.nike.com/> (January 22, 2003).

the power to save our souls (v. 21), and “the perfect law, the law of liberty” (v. 25) are probably all references to the good news of the gospel. Having introduced the idea of God’s word, James proceeds to instruct us about the imperatives of God’s word: we must *accept* the word (vv. 19-21), we must *obey* the word (vv. 22-25), and we must *live* the word (vv. 26-27). *Accepting, obeying, and living—that, according to James, is the meaning of Christianity.*

Going back three centuries before Christ, Zeno (336? B.C. - 264? B.C.)—the Greek philosopher and founder of Stoicism—offered what has become a common-place observation: since human beings have two ears but only one mouth, they should listen twice as much as they speak. The admonition to display wisdom by listening much and talking little is found often in Jewish wisdom teaching. For example, Prov 17:28: “Even fools are thought to be wise when they keep silent; when they keep their mouths shut, they seem intelligent” (NLT). And then there is also the link between hasty speech and unrighteous anger. For example, Prov 17:27: “A truly wise person uses few words; a person with understanding is even-tempered” (NLT). One Jewish source makes this observation: “Thrice was Moses angry, and thrice he failed to produce the mind of God.”² Someone has remarked, “Temper is such a valuable thing, it is a shame to lose it!” James’ very simple point in vv. 19 and 20 is that human anger does not produce behavior that is pleasing to God.

“Therefore,” begins v. 21, “take off” or “strip off”—as in the removal of clothing—“rid yourselves” of “all the filth and evil in your lives,” and—turning from the negative to the positive—accept “the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” The command to accept “the implanted word” is *not* a command to unbelievers to be converted; it is a command to believers to allow the word to influence them in all aspects of their lives. “Accept the word” is *not* a call to become a Christian; it is a call to Christians to live as Christians.

In vv. 22-25, James argues that to “accept” the word means to “do” it. “Doing” frames these verses. They begin with “be doers of the word” and end with “doers who act will be blessed in their doing.” Listening to God’s word must lead to doing it;

²Cited by James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1976), 79.

otherwise, we have not truly “accepted” the word. Jesus states it this way: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Luke 11:28, NRSV). The Apostle Paul also reflects this perspective: “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified” (Rom 2:13, NRSV). To illustrate the importance of doing and not merely hearing the word of God, James uses a simile of looking into a mirror. The precise point of comparison is not easy to see. Is James comparing *what* the two people look at? If yes, then the contrast is between the “natural face” and the “perfect law.” Is James comparing *how* the two people look at what they look at? If yes, then the contrast is between a hasty, superficial glance into a mirror and a careful, intent look into the law of God. Or, a third option, is James comparing the *result* of the looking done by the two people? If yes, then the contrast is between looking into a mirror and doing nothing, and looking into God’s law and putting it into practice. I think this last option is preferable. James is emphasizing the *results* of two actions: looking into a mirror but *not doing* anything about what is seen, and looking into God’s word and *doing* what is heard. To hear God’s word and not do it, is like looking into a mirror and not doing anything. As I look over this audience, I must commend you. From what I can see, you were not satisfied with what you saw in the mirror this morning and so you did something to improve your looks. I often quip that I may not look the best, but it’s the effort that counts: I do what I can with what I have! *Oh that each of us would put as much expense and effort into fixing-up our lives as we put into fixing-up our faces!* We fix-up our faces to come to church. We come to church to fix-up our lives. Look into God’s word. What do you see? Do you like what you see? What are you going to do about it?

²³For if you just listen and don’t obey, it is like looking at your face in a mirror but doing nothing to improve your appearance. ²⁴You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. ²⁵But if you keep looking steadily into God’s perfect law—the 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 (Jas 1:23-25, NLT).

Ideally, when we, as a child of God, look into the word of God we see the Son of God and are transformed by the Spirit of God to share in the glory of God!

In our text, James grows progressively more practical and more pointed. *Accepting* the word means *doing* the word which means *living* the word. Vv. 26 and 27 present

three tests for determining if our “religion”—if our Christianity—is genuine and godly. First, the test of *speech*. Our tongues tell the tale. What comes out of our mouths reveals what is in our hearts. Second, the test of *service*. Do we care for those who are needy? Faith that does not bless others is no blessing to us. Third, the test of *separation*. Are we separated from the world or are we stained by the world? As we will see, James has much more to say about our speech, our service to others, and our separation from the world. But here is “the bottom line”: *true religion is manifested in a lifestyle of obedience to God*. Perhaps that is why James uses the broad terms of “religious” (v. 26) and “religion” (v. 27). *Anyone, yes anyone*, who makes a claim of genuine religious experience must submit those claims to the tests of speech, service, and separation.

C. S. Lewis, in his diabolically clever book *The Screwtape Letters*, unfolds a series of (fictitious) letters from Screwtape, a professional devil and under-secretary of the department of temptation, to his nephew Wormwood, a junior tempter. Listen as I read excerpts.

My dear Wormwood, I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian. . . . [Initially, however, Wormwood is successful in distracting his patient. But then, the patient comes to his senses. We read further.]

My dear Wormwood, It seems to me that you take a great many pages to tell a very simple story. The long and the short of it is that you have let the man slip through your fingers. The situation is very grave, and I really see no reason why I should try to shield you from the consequences of your inefficiency. A repentance and renewal of what the other side call “grace” on the scale which you describe is a defeat of the first order. It amounts to a second conversion—and probably on a deeper level than the first. . . .

It remains to consider how we can retrieve this disaster. The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilising the seed which the Enemy [God] plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will. . . . The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.³

³C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Macmillan, 1959 & 1961), 11, 57, 60-61.

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” . . . “Let him do anything but act.” . . . I wonder, whose wisdom is more influential—Screwtape’s or James’?

In the cathedral at Lubek, Germany, the following inscription is carved into a stone wall.

So speaks Christ, our Lord, to us:
“You call me master, and obey me not;
You call me light, and see me not;
You call me way, and walk me not;
You call me wise, and follow me not;
You call me fair, and love me not;
You call me rich, and ask me not;
You call me eternal, and seek me not;
You call me gracious, and trust me not;
You call me noble, and serve me not;
You call me mighty, and honor me not;
You call me just, and fear me not;
If I condemn you, blame me not.”⁴

To sum up the scripture we have studied, James says: Listen and believe (vv. 19-21). Believe and do (vv. 22-25). Do and become (vv. 26-27). *Accepting the word, doing the word, living the word—that is what it means to be a Christian.* This morning you have heard the word of God. Now, just do it!

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⁴Mark Water, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Baker, 2000), 694.

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