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**Title:** Faith Works: Practices

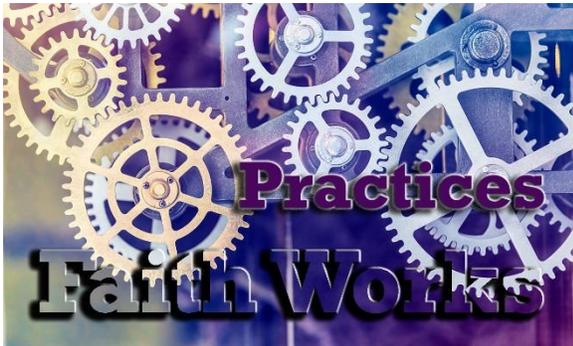
**Date:** June 16 & 17, 2018

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Matthew 7:24-27](#)

**Text:** [James 1:19-25](#)

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Here we are on Father's Day, a day that is a relative newcomer to our nation's official holiday schedule. Its origin is a Sunday morning in May of 1909 when a woman named Sonora Smart Dodd was sitting in church in Spokane, Washington, listening to a Mother's Day sermon. She thought of her father who had raised her and her siblings after

her mother died in childbirth, and she thought, fathers should get recognition, too. So she asked the minister of the church if he would deliver a sermon honoring fathers on her father's birthday, which was coming up in June, and the minister did. That was the beginning and the tradition of Father's Day caught on although slowly. Mother's Day became an official holiday in 1914; Father's Day, not until 1972 when Richard Nixon made it a national holiday.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is why Father's Day isn't as big as Mother's Day. One little boy gave an interesting description of Father's Day. He said, "Father's Day is just like Mother's Day; only you don't spend as much on a present." He is actually correct. The retail industry says that about 15 billion dollars will be spent on gifts for good old dad.<sup>2</sup> That seems like a lot to me but just a little more than half of what we spent on Mother's day.

I am going to be equally guilty. On Mother's Day, I offered a full sermon to inspire mothers. Today, I offer a short challenge for dads because we began a sermon series on the book of James last week. We need to get back to it. But the challenge does come from a verse from the Book of James. Let me set it up with a story about a father.

It's about a guy who stopped at the grocery store on the way home. He wandered around aimlessly for a while searching for the needed groceries. As is often the case in the grocery store, he kept passing this same shopper in almost every aisle. It was another father trying to shop with a totally uncooperative three-year-old boy in the cart.

The first time they passed, the three-year-old was asking over and over for a candy bar. Our observer couldn't hear the entire conversation. He just heard Dad say, "Now, Billy, this won't take long." As they passed in the next aisle, the 3-year-old's pleas had increased several octaves. Now Dad was quietly saying, "Billy, just calm down. We will be done in a minute."

When they passed near the dairy case, the kid was screaming uncontrollably. Dad was still keeping his cool. In a very low voice, he was saying, "Billy, settle down. We are almost out of here." The dad and his son reached the checkout counter just ahead of our observer. He still gave no evidence of losing control. The boy was screaming and kicking. Dad was very calmly saying over and over, "Billy, we will be in the car in just a minute and then everything will be OK."

The bystander was impressed beyond words. After paying for his groceries, he hurried to catch up with this amazing example of patience and self-control just in time to hear him say again, "Billy, we're done. It's going to be OK." He tapped the patient father on the shoulder and said, "Sir, I couldn't help but watch how you handled little Billy. You were amazing."

The dad looks at the man and says, "His name is Wesley. I'm Billy!" <sup>3</sup>

James gives us this little proverb, one which daddy Billy clearly practices. "...be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." (James 1:19b) Dads, consider that your challenge for parenting. As men encouraging our children, we need to listen more, speak carefully and model patience. Those are key to parenting good sons and daughter. It's good advice whether you are just starting out as a dad or supporting grown children.

That challenge comes just two verses before our theme verse today. This is the second sermon in a series titled "Faith Works." It's a play on words. Faith works in the sense that faith acts. Faith must be put into action, or to use today's theme, into practice. But then in another sense, faith works as in faith is effective. It actually works. Faith is valuable, and faith comes to life in us in our work when we practice it.

There is perhaps no more iconic verse about the practice of faith than James 1:22. Many of you perhaps learned it or at least heard it along the way. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only...." (James 1:22) Last week we talked about the fact that James was the "Nike letter of the Bible." Just do it. This and some verses that we will look next week are where it gets its' reputation. Don't just listen. Be doers. Put the word into practice.

It is a warning label of sorts, one that might fit well on the back or spine of every Bible. But of course, people didn't have Bibles when James wrote this. James was writing to an oral culture. Listening was the way they received

the Word of God. They heard it sitting in worship. They grew up listening to it in the synagogue. If James were to write to us today he might say, "Do not merely be readers of the Word." Or, "do not be merely students of the Word." It's not that James was against listening to the Word or for that matter, reading, studying or discussing the Word. His point is merely listening, hearing or receiving the Word of God into your life is not enough. In fact, it can be rather dangerous to your spiritual life.

James tells us why it is dangerous. Merely listening to the Word can be "self-deceiving." The word deceive (paralogizomenoi--παραλογίζομαι) means to cheat or falsely reason, literally a fraudulent deception, to miscalculate and misunderstand. Being hearers only misunderstands the purpose of scripture. <sup>4</sup>

It is interesting that it was a problem 2000 years ago when James wrote even as it is a problem today. You can study the Word of God armed with commentaries and dictionaries. You can read the Bible to be inspired devotionally by its beauty. You can listen to scripture in worship and hear a few verses every week. Study, devotion, worship are all important approaches to listening to the Word of God. But if all you are doing is studying, reading and listening, you deceive yourself into believing that you are growing spiritually when in fact, you aren't developing at all. Why? Because just hearing does not lead to life-changing behavior.

For example, someone gave me a map this week to their home. It was an incredibly well-drawn piece of paper with all sorts of information on it, a beautiful piece of art. That didn't surprise me because the person who gave it to me is an artist. She took a lot of time to put this map together and make it right and lovely. But, think about that map. It can tell me where I want to go but it cannot take me there. I had to read the map and then do what it said, following the directions.

In the same way, the Bible is powerful, but it is not magical. Having heard knowledge about the words in scripture does not bring about life change. Your life will change when you read the map and put the directions of the map into practice.

James doesn't use a map for his illustration. He uses an illustration about someone looking into a mirror, saying, "...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."(James 1:24 & 25) I am going to make an assumption that everyone here today has already looked into a mirror at least once. Some of us have looked in a mirror several times. In fact, some might have spent a lot of time in front of a mirror but that's a whole other sermon from the book of Ecclesiastes.

What are mirrors designed for? They are designed to reveal our imperfections, to show us what needs to be changed. We look into a mirror and see that we need to wash our face, or comb our hair or brush our teeth. If your hair is sticking up with a cowlick from sleep or spinach is stuck in your teeth from lunch, it doesn't matter if you look in the mirror once, ten times or a hundred times, you will remain unchanged unless you do something with what you have seen. In the same way, if you look into the Word of God and do nothing, you can end up self-deceived, have a fraudulent picture of your spirituality.

It is the equivalent of just looking *at* the mirror, not the looking *at your reflection* in the mirror. We would do well to see the Word as a mirror for which to look at oneself and see what God wants us to do.<sup>5</sup>

James is saying that belief and behavior go hand and hand. We must put into practice what we hear in God's word. Be doers of the Word, not hearers only. If this sounds familiar, it should. As I shared last week, James makes extensive reference to the Sermon on the Mount. Do you remember how Jesus ends that sermon?

He says, "...everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock." (Matthew 7: 24-25) Heard and put into practice.

But Jesus goes on to add: "But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." (Matthew 7:26-27) Heard only.

Please note that the words of Jesus aren't a firm foundation. It is putting his words into practice that is the rock solid foundation.

Jesus is serious about putting his words into practice because he returns to this theme on his last night. He says "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love." Then he adds: "You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:10, 14) Jesus wants us to practice what he preached. Jesus wants his words not just to live in us, but to live through us, to be the foundation for our lives.

When James challenges us to be doers of the word, not just hearers only, he is restating what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount and at his Last Supper. He is writing to religious people like you and me to warn against merely listening to the Word of God. The scriptures are not given to us to

simply satisfy our curiosity about who God is or how God loves us. God's Word is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should direct our lives.<sup>6</sup>

Because this is so important to our spiritual formation, James offers something of a benediction to this challenge. "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." (James 1:25) The perfect law that gives freedom" isn't the Old Testament. It is a perfect law found in the truth of Jesus.

It is yet another illusion to the Sermon of the Mount where Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). When we practice the ways of Jesus, when we are doers who act, we are blessed.

How are you doing with this? Are you putting into practice what you hear in scripture? James gives an infinite number of verses which you can use to answer that question. Like the one we used earlier to challenge fathers. "...be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;" (James 1:19b). Are you? Or how about this one, the very next verses in this section on hearing and doing. "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless." (James 1:26) If we merely hear the word, we might think, "Religious people don't gossip or lie or swear or call people names or run people down." Most of us would agree with that. But do most of us practice that?

What does your tongue say about whether or not you are a hearer only or a doer? Are you bridling your tongue or deceiving yourself into believing that you are? How you answer might inform how you answer this week's theme question. Am I a hearer only or a doer of the word? James would say those kinds of questions allow the Word of God to be a mirror.

Do you remember the mirror in Snow White? What would the witch say as she looked into it? "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" Sometimes, it told her exactly what she wanted to hear. But there came a point because mirrors don't lie, that the mirror told her, "No, you're not the fairest." Rather than receiving the truth, the witch walked away furious, missing an opportunity to use that truth to change.<sup>7</sup>

James words for us today are indeed a warning label. If we linger in front of the mirror of God's Word, it will show us who we really are and who we are really not. At that moment, we have a choice. We can reject it or we can respond to it. If we respond, we put it into practice, applying it to our lives and discover blessing.

So, don't deceive yourself. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only...." (James 1:22). Do this because it is the way James says, "Faith works."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/10697-father-day-turns-100.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/305796/father-s-day-expenditure-in-the-us/>

<sup>3</sup> Illustrations for Father's Day, retrieved by subscription, <https://sermons.com/home/illustrations/2018-06-17>

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. The Letter of James. The Anchor Bible. Page 207.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, Soren. For Self-Examination. "What is required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?" p.29.

<sup>6</sup> Evans, C. Stephen. Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word. Center for Christian Ethics, 2012. P. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Daniels, David. Application. Retrieved by subscription at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/june/txtmsg5.html>