

“Doers of the Word”

September 2, 2021

Mission: Possible series

James is one of my favorite books of the Bible – and one reason why Luka’s middle name is James. I’ll admit that reading through James as a whole letter carries some “gut punch” moments of conviction. James is direct, maybe even too direct, and downright offensive at times. Most of us may be put off by something in the book of James. It reminds me of Old Testament prophets who were equal opportunity offenders; no one liked them all the time.

James doesn’t hold back or mince words. He pushes us to confront the moral and ethical implications of our faith in Jesus Christ, and sometimes we don’t really want to pay close attention or have anyone challenge us. Digging more deeply serves to remind us that living out our faith is a daily endeavor - and not always simple.

This letter was written to Jewish Christians who were living outside of Jerusalem – many of them were rejected by both the Jewish community and the Gentile community. They didn’t fit in anywhere. So, the letter offers some practical advice about staying connected to God and hearing and doing God’s Word. The influence of the Jewish tradition is evident in references to Abraham, Rahab, and more. And James is clear and to the point – just as challenging now as it was long ago.

And the author is named. James was a younger brother of Jesus, so it may be Jesus’ brother, which offers a some special perspective as we read his letter and look back in the Book of Acts to remember that James, Jesus’ younger brother, was a leader in the early church. Or the author may be someone who followed James closely and wrote it after his death around the year 62 AD. The letter isn’t long, but packs a lot of commands to those who first read it - and for us now.

And it’s interesting to consider this letter coming from a man who would’ve known Jesus as a brother - a very different perspective. Perhaps it was more intimate and closer - and maybe even like sibling relationships we know - some fighting or grumbling or wondering how this was all going to play out as they grew up and Jesus got into more and more trouble with religious and government authorities.

What we know is that James was a leader - a doer - who had been transformed by the word taking root in his heart and life. It went beyond a family relationship; this is a faith relationship. And so, he wrote to others who were seeking to live their faith in Jesus Christ - who lived, died, rose again, told his disciples to go and make disciples and promised the Holy Spirit, and ascended to be with God the Father.

James focuses on the practice of our faith. Practical theology means that what we

believe about God has practical implications for our everyday lives. James is clear that discipleship is something we practice; it's something we do. We are disciples, but that carries a call to a faith in action. So, James uses that example of a mirror - looking at ourselves, but forgetting what we look like. James calls us to be doers, not just hearers.

Theologian Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation, really didn't like this short book. He called it an "epistle of straw" because he felt it wasn't focused enough on faith alone for God's salvation and offered a "works-righteousness" message. Luther was fearful that James offered a message that works saved people rather than faith alone.

But if he were here today, I'd argue with Luther. James isn't saying that doing our faith is the way we earn God's love. Rather, being doers of the word expresses God's love that's growing in us. We live out God's salvation we've received by grace through faith. It's the way that God transforms the world and invites others to experience true freedom and hope that comes from a saving relationship with God.

At the beginning of the letters, God is the source of all that we are and all that we have - our Creator and Provider. That's where James starts - the foundational piece - but then he moves quickly to our response. For James, it's active faith that shows our hearts. It's not simply what we say, but what we do. In a time when so much of our lives are wrapped up in words - some written in a text or a social media post - a reminder that our actions really do speak loudly is welcome and needed - and even challenging.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Eugene Peterson says it like this in The Message: *"Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. ACT on what you hear!"* To listen, to hear, is deliberate work. We have to concentrate, pay attention, commit new information to memory, and process before doing something. Real listening should lead to response and action.

Maybe the challenge for us is to hear James asking a question that underlies everything: You have a relationship with Jesus. So what? How does that relationship influence your actions? Why does it matter?

I often wonder how much stronger our witness would be if we were more open about *why* we serve and give and *why* we're connected to a faith community - not as a way to draw attention to ourselves, but to invite others to consider how God might be calling them into relationship. It's an invitation and access point. Doing our faith is an encouragement and inspiration to others. We know that people are drawn to ways they can be involved in something that seeks the common good. And James is clear to make care and compassion a key point.

As much as we might avoid religion as a topic of conversation, James would say

that faith isn't a private matter. Yes, your personal relationship with God through Christ is your own – no one else's. And our prayer life and time spent alone with God is essential to faith. But if we claim to have a relationship with God, there must be public demonstration of it. Be doers of the word...

Being unstained by the world isn't a call to cut ourselves off from others or go through rituals that keep us pure, but James actually calls for just the opposite - going to places and people who might not know that God's love is for them and offering grace. It echoes Jesus' words in Matthew 25 when he says that caring for those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger to us, naked, sick, and in prison.

Perhaps James talks about anger because it's another way we get off course and become distracted from doing our faith and living in authentic community. Have you gotten angry this week by something you've heard or seen? That doesn't mean we don't get angry, but we have to acknowledge those struggles and realities honestly.

Every year when we come to Labor Day weekend, I remember a quote from Sir Thomas More from the 16th century. He said, "The things, good Lord, that we pray for, give us grace to labor for." It's more than thoughts and prayers that we offer. His statement calls us to put our faith into action – going beyond what we pray for and doing what we can to make it happen. It means showing our faith in Jesus outwardly in all areas of our lives. I've seen the same sentiment all over social media put even more simply: "Pray and do something." Prayer is foundational, but prayer should lead us to action for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

It really is a call to what's known as "risk-taking mission and service." Bishop Robert Schnase says "all that we do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they will ever be part of the community of faith" is risk-taking mission and service. It makes us look outward - even beyond what's comfortable for us, recognizing the needs that we might not see easily, and taking a new step not only to meet a need, but also be transformed personally in the process.

I read this statement: "People should be able to look at the way Christians live and begin to understand what the Gospel is about. Our lives must tell them who Jesus is and what he cares about." It's always been important - and never been more important! Our lives must tell others who Jesus is and what he cares about. There's plenty that I hear from the Christian community that doesn't speak to who Jesus is or what he cares about. That's a powerful reminder to us! Needs of others aren't met by just our words; needs are met by our faithful response. It's not just reading or hearing - but doing.

Christ-followers are people who live transformed lives because of the experience of a risen Savior in Jesus Christ. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, used the term "holiness." Holiness is both personal and social - loving God with heart and life.

Both of them must exist if we want to be faithful to God who has put us in relationship with the world.

So, the challenge is before us as we hear about the good work in our community and consider where we are. We can give money and stuff, and that's important. But how might we enter into relationship and offer our time and our skills - precious gifts - so that others know the love of God in Christ? It's a move from transactional mission to relational mission - transformational mission, and it's vital to our personal spiritual growth, our growth as the Body of Christ, and the transformation of the world. It's not a call to do more or be busier. It's an invitation to be engaged - to hear and do. It's mission - possible - because it's what Christ calls us to do with his grace. Hearing and doing...inward and outward...personal and social...

We're invited to the table today - the meal offered by our Lord Jesus - to be formed into those who receive grace and then extend it with others. It's a meal we receive, but it's also an invitation to be transformed. We're invited to be nurtured as disciples of Jesus so that we can be strengthened and encouraged to carry his mission - to make disciples so that the world is transformed by God's love through us. As we come, we know we need God's grace, so we pray...