

## **A FAITH THAT WORKS: Just Do It!**

**James 1:17-27**

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I.

Every time you watch a food commercial, you can't help but feel hungry. After seeing commercials with a tasty hamburger, mouth-watering pancakes, or a bowl of creamy ice cream, we've nearly all craved what we just saw. But then comes the disappointment when we're handed a flattened bun with one pickle, a leaf of shriveled lettuce, and the famous 1980s Wendy's question, "Where's the beef?" Have you ever had that experience?

We quickly learn that what we see isn't always what we get. The secret behind this deception is food styling, a technique photographers use to make us taste through our eyes. There are many tricks used in food advertising to show the best versions of foods or drinks in commercials.

Like burgers, burger lovers know burgers look big and tasty in commercials, but the reality can be very different. To make them look appetizing, ad professionals put sponges inside hamburgers to make them look taller and toothpicks to hold the ingredients in place. The final touch is the oil painted on the meat, which creates the illusion that the meat is juicy and freshly cooked.

One of my favorite major food groups can be one of the most stressful foods to photograph – ice cream! It can melt before you get the perfect shot, so to avoid this, professional photographers replace ice cream with mashed potatoes mixed with hair conditioner and food coloring, which makes it look real. And best of all? It doesn't melt.

Pancakes can be both sweet and savory. The secret to making them look delicious in promotional photos is adding cardboard discs between them so that the tower appears taller. Motor oil is poured on them to keep the food from absorbing it as it would with regular syrup. This also keeps the syrupy pancakes looking bright and gooey throughout the photoshoot.

With some food styling, we can be fooled by some shallow cosmetic changes. But if we were to taste or interact with the food, we'd know something was up. We'd know there was a difference between what had been advertised and what we were experiencing.

II.

We may not use food styling in the church, but we do use a bit of scripture styling. We Christians talk a whole lot about honoring the Bible. Some Christians say they believe every word of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. One preacher said he believes the entire Bible, from Genesis to maps—as in the maps of ancient lands included in the back of some Bibles.

Some churches, like ours, occasionally have a huge Bible at the front of the sanctuary on the altar table. Some churches stand whenever Scripture is read aloud in worship.

When I traveled to the country of Belarus years ago, we were reminded never to put our Bibles on the floor as that was disrespectful in their culture.

Some say the Bible should never be written in or dog-eared because it's so holy. Some post the Ten Commandments on billboards and outside courthouses or mandate them in public classrooms. Some get verses from the Bible tattooed on their arms.

We post scripture in our homes and cross-stitch them on doilies. Many homes, including my own, have multiple copies. When I travel, I collect Bibles in the language of the countries I visit, along with playing cards from each country. Bibles and cards. I'm a complex Baptist.

Politicians and public officials praise the Bible, lifting it in word or by hand. They quote it in speeches. In 2016, lawmakers in Tennessee made national news by approving a bill that would make the Bible the official book of Tennessee. Alongside milk, the state beverage, and the raccoon, the state wild animal, they added the Bible as one of the official state books.<sup>i</sup>

It is tempting for some to do a bit of "scripture styling," like food advertisers. But if we were to taste or interact with some of those who praise the Bible or if some were to interact with us, they or we'd know something was up. We'd know there was a difference between what had been advertised and what we were experiencing.

III.

A long time ago, a man named James looked around at the young church. He wasn't looking at the world or non-believers. He was looking at and writing to those who had professed faith and been baptized but were cold and casual about living out that faith. They said they had "faith," but when James looked at their lives, he didn't see much outward evidence that they lived as Christians should. And he had something to say about it. Tim Mackie, from the Bible Project, says the book of *"(James) is a beautifully crafted punch in the gut for those who want to follow Jesus."*<sup>iii</sup> James is like the friend who tells it like it is. No sugarcoating it.

So, in love, James calls it out, saying that when you advertise faith with your words but not your lives and actions, it hurts the church. "Scripture styling" makes credibility difficult and confuses the people around you. James might say, "You advertise with words that you follow a faith that teaches mercy, yet I saw you walk by a man begging for food in the market yesterday and heard you mutter, "Lazy bum. Get a job." So, which is it? A faith of mercy or a faith of no or conditional mercy?" James says you can't lift up scripture for a photo op and then not lift up another when the camera isn't around.

Some have accused James of being a little too heavy on works over faith; they worry that people will get the wrong idea that they somehow earn their salvation by what they do rather than what Christ has done for us. But that's a bit like getting mad at a first-grade teacher for not

teaching the alphabet when they begin a unit on the components of a sentence. Of course, the students must know the alphabet to write sentences, but the first-grade teacher assumes her students learned the alphabet already, and knowing it, they should be ready to live and grow as readers and writers.

James assumes the young church members already know that faith is a gift from God and results from faith alone, not our works. So, James doesn't waste much time on this, but he is good enough to remind us at the beginning of our text today that we know the alphabet. James says remember that God loves us and that every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from God, whose character never changes. God is good. God is generous in grace. God has chosen and adopted us into God's family. Belief it. Trust it. This is who you are.

But now, friends, you need to live like it. Live as though you truly understand the gift of God's grace because if you truly understand it, your response will be obedience born from love and gratitude. "If you love Me, keep my commandments" is not a salvation statement. It's a response to Jesus. Your obedience is a response to love; it doesn't earn love.

James says that if you love the Lord, you'll want and desire to honor the word of God. And to honor the word of God, you must do what it says. No more scripture styling. No more using scriptures as food for advertising rather than food for action.

IV.

Let's say you're at a restaurant and eating one of those disappointing burgers that looks like it was assembled by a two-year-old, but you're too hungry to care, so you take a bite. And a bit of that ketchup that somehow got on the top of the bun by the toddler employee ends up on the end of your nose. You don't feel it, you can't see it, but your friend gives you a look and says, "You've got something on the end of your nose." There isn't one of us who will leave that smudge there. We will grab our napkin to wipe it off or take out a mirror to ensure we get it all and that there's no spice, seed, or food in our teeth. And upon seeing it, we'll clean it off or out.

According to James, if we hear the word of God or read the word of God without putting it into action, it's like having a friend telling you about the ketchup on your face or the food in your teeth and not doing anything about it. But James isn't talking about our physical appearance. He's speaking about the heart. The Bible is a mirror or a friend we can use to see where there's a smudge on our heart and learn how God wants us to live out the word of God. The Bible is not to be used as a flashlight to reveal other people's shortcomings; it's a mirror to reveal our own so we might learn to be doers and not just hearers of God's word.

But where do we start? Where do we even begin to become doers of the word with so many commandments and teachings in the Bible? James offers an answer in verses 26 and 27, where he says, "If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us." True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God, is not

limited to orphans and widows but is expressed in our care for who they represent, the disadvantaged demographics within society. To be doers of the word means caring for vulnerable, marginalized, and underprivileged persons.

The religious activity that is pleasing to God requires watching what we say and how we say it and caring for the most vulnerable. We most appropriately respond to God's grace by staying close to those who are hurting and away from all that would draw us away from God's Word and faithfulness to it.

V.

Scripture styling sees and hears the word of God and then walks out the door to live as we want, with ketchup on the end of our noses. But pesky James, with a punch to our gut, reminds us that this is a faith that doesn't work. A faith that works must be more than words. It must include a life of obedience that is a loving and grateful response to God's love and grace. To every church with a big Bible on the altar table, James might ask, "What are you doing to care for the impoverished?" To every Christian who talks about believing the Bible from Genesis to maps, James might say, "What are you doing to control your tongue and anger in person or your online posting?" To every politician who quotes the Bible or wants the Ten Commandments mandated in schools, James might ask, "What are you doing to honor God and others, even those across the aisle or those who didn't vote for you or vote like you?" To every preacher like me who studies God's word and stands to declare it on Sundays, James might say, "What are you doing to support the most vulnerable?"

James challenges us to move beyond appearances. He reminds us that faith isn't about creating an illusion of holiness; it's about living out the truth of God's Word. The world is watching, just like we watch those food commercials. And friends, they know when there is a difference between what Jesus taught and what they experience from some Christians. What we show—how we live, love, and serve—matters. As we go out today, let's make sure that what people see in us isn't just a styled version of faith for show but the real thing—a faith that acts, serves, and loves. A faith that works for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> Credit to Rev. Dr. Noel Schoonmaker's sermon, "Faith that Works," for the inspiration on the ways we honor scripture in words but not necessarily actions. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004286/view>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.stjohnstimaru.org/sermons-1/2021/8/29/james-week-one-walk-the-talk>