

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Just Do It”**

**Mark 7:1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 – 23
James 1:17 – 27**

August 30, 2015

Back in the late 1980’s, the Nike athletic shoe company launched a new advertising campaign, built around the now-familiar slogan: **“Just Do It!”** The commercials, featuring the likes of LeBron James, Serena Williams, Roger Federer, Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, Shia Labeouf, and a host of other celebrities... urge us **not** to allow our doubts, fears, and reservations to hold us back from taking on a challenge. *“Don’t be afraid of the obstacles before you,”* they say, *“gather up your courage, get out there, and just do it!”*

This ad campaign seemed to strike a nerve, because it was, and continues to be, extremely successful... and Nike’s share of the athletic shoe market increased dramatically. And, I have to admit, those three little words... “Just do it”... really can be quite motivational. I mean, I don’t know how many times, as a high school cross-country coach, I said that very thing to one timid runner or another, who was fretting and fussing at the starting line of some important meet. I’d take the kid aside, look him or her right in the eyes, and say, *“Stop psyching yourself out, and just do it! And you’ll be fine!”* And, invariably, they **were** just fine... and usually did better than they thought they’d do!

I was reminded of Nike’s “Just Do It” ad campaign, as I reflected on our Scripture lesson this morning from the Letter of James. Not that James was trying to tap into the ancient Near Eastern sports shoe market; and not that he was trying to drum up support for the Asia Minor Marathon. No, I thought about the Nike slogan because of James’ insistence that the Christian faith is a matter of action, and not just words... it’s a matter of “doing,” and not just “hearing.”

Which sounds a lot like the topic of a sermon that I preached a couple of weeks ago, also based on a text from James... which highlighted the fact that the faith which we hold in our hearts and our heads, needs to give rise to good works that we do with our hands and our feet. As James pointed out in that part of his letter, “Faith without works... is dead.” But the point that James is making in our text today, while similar to our lesson from earlier this month, is slightly different... and that difference is very important.

In our lesson this morning, James **isn’t** so much saying that genuine Christian faith must, of necessity, lead to good works; what he’s saying is that, as Christian disciples, we must not only **hear** the “word...” we must also **do** the “word.” In other words, in order to live faithful, mature, and meaningful Christian lives, it’s not enough to merely hear the teaching of the gospel; or be familiar with God’s commandments; or have a general knowledge of the law, and the prophets, and the various parables of Jesus. According to James, we must also **do** that which we hear; we must put into action the precepts and principles which we are taught; we must allow our lives to be shaped, and reformed, and guided by the Scriptural, spiritual, testimony which we understand to be the Word of God.

It's sort of like when, as parents, we give our kids specific instructions about cleaning their room, or mowing the lawn, or doing the dinner dishes. We don't just want for them to hear what we have to say on the subject; we darn well want for them to hear it... and then **do** it!

Or think about what it's like trying to drive anywhere in the Hamptons during the summer. We all know that it's a free-for-all out on the roads, right? I mean, sometimes it seems like the wild, wild, West on wheels... with half the drivers seemingly oblivious to even the most simple and basic traffic regulations! Which drives me nuts, I admit. But the thing about it that **drives** me nuts isn't that our traffic laws are mysterious, or hidden, or unknown; it's the fact that the laws are extremely **well**-known, by everybody... but still ignored, disregarded, blown off, and broken with impunity. There's a massive disconnect between "knowing" and "doing" on our streets and highways... and **that's** what's so incredibly frustrating during the summer.

Well, James wants his readers throughout all the various churches, including **our** church, to understand that the life of Christian discipleship is subject to the very same principle. If all we do is simply hear what the Bible has to say, if all we do is **know** it... while making little, if any, effort to put what we hear and know into **practice**; then our life of faith isn't going to be much of a life... and it's not going to give evidence of very much faith.

You see, James knows that there's a wealth of wisdom, understanding, and truth in the teachings that we have come to know as Holy Scripture. But he also knows that it's going to make precious little difference if all it does is rattle around in our heads... without ever being put to actual use in our lives. We'll be like a kid who knows he's supposed to clean his room; but spends the day playing video games instead. We'll be like a driver who knows that the left turn lane is for turning left; but who goes straight anyway, and probably through a red light, to boot.

Hear again what James has to say on this subject:

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does."

And then James goes on to give a few great examples of what it looks like for a person to "do the word" and not just "hear" it. He writes:

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Or, to put it another way, James is saying:

"Here are three wonderful ways in which to be a doer of the Word and not just a hearer of it. Watch what you say, and don't use your words to hurt or damage others; go out of your way to care for 'the least of these...' people like orphans, and widows, and others who may be struggling with the burdens of life; and avoid sin and evil to the best of your ability."

Those are all important ways in which we can put into action the teachings and demands of God's Word... which we have heard. And, of course, James could have listed a hundred other examples as well:

God's Word tells us to worship God alone... so, devote yourself to God and renounce idolatry. The Word says to forgive others as we have been forgiven by God... so don't hold grudges, and work at being more gracious and merciful. The Lord would have us avoid lying and deceit... so be honest and tell the truth. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves... so lay aside indifference and bigotry, and try to care for others as Jesus Himself cares for them. And on, and on, we could go.

James knows, and he wants to make sure that his readers all know, that there's a big, big difference between hearing something, knowing something, believing something... and actually **doing** something with what we hear, and know, and believe. And, as I said before, we're already very much aware of this... from our day to day experience. But James' point is that, even though we may already know and understand this principle in many aspects of our life... it's still easy to forget it, or neglect it, when it comes to our **religious** life; our faith life; the life that we now live as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

We know from some of Paul the Apostle's writings that, from the earliest days of the Christian church, it's been tempting for people to focus so much on the grace of Christ, which, as we know, no amount of good works can ever earn for us... to focus on **that** so much that good works, or doing God's Word, sort of slides into the background of our faith and life.

Apparently some early Christians took the idea of being saved by grace through faith to such an extreme, that they considered the actual doing of God's Word to be more or less unnecessary. That was an extreme view, and certainly one not held by the majority of early Christians; but it was still out there, and Paul did at times have to speak against it. And that idea has persisted over the years, right up into our own twenty-first century day and age. In fact, it was such a problem during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, that Martin Luther coined a name for it: **antinomianism**... which Luther used to denote the belief that, since we are saved by grace, it's no longer necessary for us to keep God's moral law.

Anyway, the point that I want us to get in all this is that, if we aren't diligent and careful, it really is possible for us to lose sight of the importance of being "doers" of God's Word... and not just "hearers" of it. The reasons for this in our own time are probably legion: we're too busy; we're too distracted; we're exhausted by the non-stop demands of modern life; we're dealing with family stress, or financial stress, or occupational stress at work; we're overwhelmed with health concerns. Or maybe we've just become anesthetized to the need to be doers of God's Word, by the current cultural malaise in which superficiality rules... and it doesn't really matter what we do, or if we do anything at all.

Whatever the reason, James' challenge is a good reminder to us all that, whatever else we might think, or feel, or believe about our faith... putting it into real and actual practice needs to be a key component of it; if it would be everything that it can be, and should be.

So, to wrap things up, what are some things that we can **do**, to help ourselves to **do** a little better at being **doers** of God's Word... and not just hearers of it? Well, for one thing, we can all probably stand to do a better job of being "hearers" in the first place! I mean, we all get a certain amount of credit for being here this morning, and for all the other times we come to church... when we do, certainly, hear "the Word." But we want to make sure that we don't just stop with church attendance... and that we make time for other opportunities to really hear, and know, and learn what the Word has to say to us.

One good way to do this, of course, is to read the Bible... as many of us are trying to do this year in our 375th Anniversary Bible Challenge. A great way to hear the Word, and to know the Word, is to *read* the Word. So, if you're not already doing that, I really, really, really encourage you to get started with it. It will change your faith life forever. And to this we could also add: taking part in Bible studies or adult Sunday school classes when they're offered; and reading good books that deal with various aspects of the Bible or Christian faith and theology; and asking your pastor to answer biblical questions which may perplex you.

Another important way that we can make progress in being "doers of the Word" is by starting small... and trying to make slow and steady progress from there. Don't worry about trying to "do" every last thing that you find in God's Word, at least not right off the bat. Find one or two specific areas where you, in your heart of hearts, know that you could be a better "doer" than you have been... and start with that.

As in many endeavors in life, when it comes to being a doer of God's Word, if we bite off more than we can chew just as we're getting started, we run the risk of being overwhelmed... and then giving up on the whole project. So, start small; do better in doing one or two things; grow and get stronger from there. Any little step we take in the right direction, matters. And it will make a big difference.

Finally, I think that simply being mindful of the need to be doers of the Word... keeping before our eyes an awareness that this sort of thing really is important; will help us do a better job of being doers, and not just hearers. As I said before, there's incredible cultural inertia that works against taking seriously the doing of God's Word. Every day we're surrounded and assaulted by the attitude that says that it just doesn't matter. Well, it does matter... whether anybody else acknowledges it or not. And we need to keep reminding ourselves of that truth... every single day of our life. So that we don't follow the lead of our goofed up culture, and buy the lie that the only thing that really matters is our fifteen minutes of fame.

So, with all that in mind... let's get out there, and just do it! Do God's Word; do God's will; do life God's way! And our discipleship will be better, and stronger, and more meaningful than it's ever been before!

That's the promise of the gospel! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!