



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“FAITH THAT WORKS”

Scripture Lessons: James 1:17-27

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, August 30, 2009.

It's an exciting time of year isn't it? School has started for most of the children and youth in our congregation. Fall schedules are getting started. Cooler weather seems to be just around the corner. And best of all college football games are starting this Thursday night! I'm not even a South Carolina football fan, and I am excited about their game this week!

College was a very spiritually forming time in my life. For the first time, my participation in the church was up to me. Thankfully, God surrounded me with some good Presbyterian friends who encouraged me to participate in worship, Bible studies, and mission projects on a regular basis. There was a church on the edge of the Clemson University campus that held worship services on Sunday nights where my friends and I would frequently attend. This church met in a converted warehouse and the pastor worked really hard to relate to the college students who attended there. There was one sermon that I will never forget. Before the pastor preached he showed a short video that he had created. It showed the pastor on Sunday morning in his church clothes treating everyone nicely and shaking hands with people in front of the church. However on Monday, it showed him riding his motorcycle down the road on the Clemson campus. As he was riding he pulled up next to a college student riding a bicycle, and the pastor stuck out his arm and pushed the student off of his bike and into a ditch; it was a pretty impressive fall. The pastor's point was clear: the faith that we profess on Sundays should impact how we live our life every day of the week.

Unfortunately, the statistics show that Christians in mainline congregations like ours do not do a good job at incorporating our faith into our daily lives. Gustav Nelson, who is a leader in the Presbyterian Church, shares this:

Less than ten percent of those who gather each week for worship typically take part in any specific Christian service like feeding the homeless or working to help the poor or visiting the shut-in. Even in so-called “high commitment” churches, where tithing, participation in Bible study, and service to the community are supposedly required, less than fifty percent of the people actually move beyond worship to ministry.¹

The truth is that many Christians can easily share with one another how their faith in God has helped them through the tough times in their lives. However, for many of those same Christians, it is more difficult for them to share how their faith in God impacts their daily life: whether that is at school, work, home, or out in public. Unfortunately, it's more common than not for there to be some disconnect between the faith a Christian professes and the way they live their lives.

And you know what? Sometimes I can totally relate. I will go on a mission trip or retreat, where each day I have spent time in personal devotion, worshiped with the gathered Christian community, prayed with others, discerned God's faithful Word with others, and served people in various

¹ Don Tuttle, “Be Not Deceived” *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol XIV, Number 5, August 2003, September 2003.

communities. I come back home really on fire for God, and confident that everything I say and everything that I do will be reflective of the faith I have in Jesus Christ. But something happens. I get back home and get back in my normal routine, and my plan to have devotional time every morning sometimes falls through. My plan to be more personally involved in serving the “least of these” in Charleston doesn’t happen. And I see glimpses of a disconnect between my faith and the way I live my life.

According to the Book of James, this isn’t a new problem. Now to be honest, James, the writer of this book hasn’t gotten the best reviews in the past. Martin Luther called this letter an “epistle of straw”² and said that there was “nothing of the nature of the gospel in it.”³ But isn’t it a practical book?: “Do this and don’t do that. Be a doer of the word. Show me your deeds. Keep a tight reign on your tongue. Help those in your society who have the least power.” It’s a practical book for sure. And for the same reasons, it’s such a convicting book! I have to be honest, when I saw it come up in the lectionary as the epistle lesson for this Sunday, I started to say “thanks, but not thanks!” But then I realized, this was the lesson that I, this was the lesson that we, needed to study today.

So the disconnect between faith and life that is found so often in the mainline church, was also something that James saw in the early church. Christians during his time had the head knowledge of the faith because they had heard the word, they had heard the gospel, but were not living it out. James could have just pointed out the shortcomings of the faith community and slammed them for who they had become, and called them a bunch of hypocrites. And there are people outside the church who do that today. But instead James takes a different route which spoke to those in the early church and which still can speak to us today.

And so James begins his critique of the church with a reminder of who God is: God is the one who gives every perfect gift.⁴ Every act of generosity and every perfect gift is from our Father above. And this generosity that God offers does not change. In the ancient world, people would study the lights in the heavens and any change would provide clues for how God might be changing and what impact, positive or negative, this might have on human life. But our God does not change. This is a confirmation of Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” And this God who does not change in his generosity, is the one who gives us birth by the word of truth. James is saying that our Christian life has been birthed by God’s divine declaration of the good news of Jesus Christ and the law. And not only that, but we are also the “first fruits” of God’s creatures. In ancient Israel, during the first harvest, the first fruits of that harvest were given to God as an offering. This understanding of the first fruits belonging to God continues metaphorically in the Gospels. James reminds us that we too belong to God.

And James isn’t simply offering these Christians a lesson in theology, a lesson in the study of God. These people know who God is. But he is letting these Christians know that who God is and what God has done should have a significant impact on who they are.

In his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a long and well respected work of Protestant theology, John Calvin begins with the following: Book one, chapter one: Without knowledge of self

² Jenny McDevitt, “James 1:17-27”, *Join the Feast*. [<http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/07/august-30-2009-james-117-27-jenny.html>], August 24, 2009.

³ Jenny McDevitt, “James 1:17-27”, *Join the Feast*. [<http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/07/august-30-2009-james-117-27-jenny.html>], August 24, 2009.

⁴ Richard Carlson, “Exegesis: James 1:17-27” *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol XIV, Number 5, August 2003, September 2003.

there is no knowledge of God. Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self. Our knowledge of God informs our knowledge of ourselves and who we were created to be.

Because God is generous with us, we should be generous with God, with one another, and with the world. Because we have been birthed by the gospel, our lives should represent what God intends both for and from humanity. Because we are the first fruits, our lives belong to God. We must be quick to listen (which is tough to do); slow to speak (even harder still); and slow to anger (sometimes the toughest of all). Eugene Peterson's bible called *The Message* translates this passage as saying, "Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear." And James says that most importantly, we must be doers of the word. We must be doers of God's divine declaration of the gospel and law of love that he explains in chapter two: "love your neighbor as yourself."

Unfortunately, in the early church, there were some who were only hearers of the word who deceived themselves. They would hear the word, the gospel, and not live it out. James says that they were like "those who look at themselves in the mirror, and on going away, immediately forget what they were like." Looking into the mirror is something that we can relate to isn't it? Most of us have already looked at ourselves in the mirror at least once today as we were getting ready for church: while we shaved, fixed our hair, or checked our teeth. Isn't that embarrassing when you have something stuck in your teeth and no one tells you about it?! And so we check ourselves in mirror often during the day. I would probably be embarrassed if I counted the number of times that I looked at myself in the mirror in a day and had to share that information with others. But I don't think James is talking about us looking in the mirror and remembering or forgetting that we saw something stuck in our teeth. Instead he is saying, when we look at ourselves in the mirror and see ourselves as being birthed by God's word for God's purposes, are we remembering that and living out that truth in our daily lives? James is pleading with his community: don't see who you are created to be in Christ, but then forget that it determines who you are and how you are to live. James' message to the early church is as relevant today as it was back then to a group of Christians living during an exciting and scary time after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Now is an exciting time in the life of First Scots, isn't it? We have the construction of our new Christian education building and fellowship space in process now. Twenty-four percent of our church budget goes outside the walls of this church to worthy ministries and projects that are supported by our local and world mission committees. We are going to be building a Habitat house this year. Fall classes, Kirk Club, youth group, Men's Breakfast, Presbyterian Women groups, Sunday school classes and much more are beginning again. Our church will be participating in up to six mission trips this coming year. Last week we welcomed another great group of new members.

But it is also somewhat of a nervous time as well. We are not going to have our Wednesday night fellowship suppers this year. These meals were times when members of our church both young and old gathered together to break bread; something Jesus did with his disciples often. It was announced at our session meeting this past week that we are going to need congregation members to open their homes and invite other members for meals to ensure that fellowship happens this year.

Kirk Club, an amazing Tuesday night Christian education program for children and youth, will be starting in a few weeks. What I love about Kirk Club so much is that it has impacted not only the children and youth of our church but also other children and youth in our community. And we have some great volunteers, some great members in ministry, who do the ministry of Kirk Club. But because so many children and youth take part in this ministry, we still need more people to sign up to help.

Our church has made a great commitment to the Meals on Wheels program in Charleston. We deliver to two routes every day of the week. But right now we are short on drivers, and unfortunately, there have been occasions when meals were not delivered. With a congregation of over 1400 members, it is hard to believe that we would ever be short of members in ministry for any of our programs or mission projects, but the reality is that sometimes we are. We need more doers of the word.

I will never forget my pal Mr. Bill from the Pioneers program at Lexington Presbyterian Church. Mr. Bill volunteered to spend time every Sunday night teaching Bible lessons and life skills to a bunch of elementary school boys. Not an easy job! I don't remember a single Bible lesson that Mr. Bill taught me years ago, but I do remember him surprising me on my birthday one year with ice cream and baseball cards. The faith that Mr. Bill professed wasn't what caught my eye. What has stayed with me over the past twenty years, was remembering him living out his faith in Jesus Christ by genuinely caring about me, by loving his neighbor. Who can you impact by living out your faith?

I also remember my Calculus teacher in high school. It wasn't because of her faith; instead it was because she had two signs that she displayed proudly on the wall. One said: "No whining." And she enforced that rule on several occasions. The other said, "Math is not a spectator sport." I imagine the same thing can be said about our faith. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Go put your creed into your deed" and "What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say."

If you are actively living out your faith, then I hope this is an affirmation of the work that you are doing. Keep on, keeping on! And if you have been wanting to be more of a doer, then I hope this is the nudge of encouragement that you have been looking for and that you would actively seek out those opportunities to live out your faith. You can even sign up for Kirk Club on the way out the door today.

In her latest post on *Join the Feast*, Jenny McDevitt told this story:

One of the sermons I remember best is a sermon I didn't actually hear. During the expected sermon time, the preacher offered only a few introductory comments - and then sent the congregation out of the sanctuary and into the community, to be "doers" of all that we proclaim in church each Sunday. One church member said afterwards, "Every week, we hear the sermon. This week, we lived it."⁵

We don't live out our faith, because God coerces us to do so. We don't live out our faith, because we are trying to earn our salvation. God has already claimed us in Jesus Christ. We live out our faith, we become doers of the word (doers of the Gospel), we are faithful because that is who God is and that is who God created us to be.

⁵ Jenny McDevitt, "James 1:17-27", *Join the Feast*. [<http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/07/august-30-2009-james-117-27-jenny.html>], August 24, 2009.