

**Practical Faith for Everyday People:
DOING THE WORD**

James 1:17-27

You can be more than you ever imagined!

A sermon preached by
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Fort Smith, Arkansas
September 17, 2017

Tom Brady, the quarterback of the New England Patriots professional football team, is one of the NFL's best players, and many think he is the best quarterback ever to play the game. He has won five Super Bowls with the Patriots, the only player ever to win five with one team, and he was the Most Valuable Player in four of those victories. His career accomplishments are amazing.

One would think that somebody like Tom Brady would never have a moment of self-doubt or depression at all. Surely he is on the top of the mountain all the time, right? In 2005, Brady was 28 years old, and he had just won his third Super Bowl. He did an interview with Steve Kroft of CBS' *60 Minutes*. At one point he confessed to Kroft, "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what it is all about. I reached my goal, my dream, my life.' Me, I think, *God, it's got to be more than this*. I mean this isn't, this can't be, what it's all cracked up to be."

"What's the answer?" Steve asked.

"I wish I knew," Brady replied. "I wish I knew."¹

What's it all about? Do you ever think about that question? What is the meaning and the purpose behind all our accomplishments, all our struggles, all our daily activities? Why do we do what we do, desire what we desire, love what we love, hate what we hate? How does our faith make a difference in all of this? What's it all about?

In the trenches of life, we need a practical faith. We don't need a faith that is some abstract philosophical system. We don't need "pie in the sky by and by." We need something that will get us through this week, a faith that will give us strength and endurance in the tough times of life, something we can depend on day by day.

That's why I want to spend a few weeks this fall talking about "Practical Faith for Everyday People." I know this is what we need more than anything else. I find a great deal of practical faith in the Letter of James. This is a very "Methodist" letter—more focused on action than theory, just like most of us Methodists. Some have

dismissed James as antithetical to Paul's writing on salvation by faith. In fact, Martin Luther called James "an epistle of straw." But I think James is a complement to Paul, and it has much to teach us today about practical faith.

James was probably written later in the first century, after the Church was beginning to be established and evidently attracting some wealthy members. We don't know exactly which "James" is supposedly the author, but most scholars think the intended reference is to James, the brother of Jesus, who was a leader in the early years of the church in Jerusalem. The letter betrays a Jewish background, but it is written in well-developed Greek style, and it is more general than specific to a particular church situation. All that is to say, we don't know exactly who wrote it or when or to whom it was written, but it has some excellent teaching for Christians of every time and place. For the next few weeks, I want to work through this little letter and see what it can tell us about what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. How does James answer the question, "What's it all about?"

In today's segment, we find three insights. First, we acknowledge that everything good in life is a gift from God. James says, "*Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all.*"² The first step, the foundation of a practical faith, is to understand that God is the source of everything good in life. This is not news. This is a reminder, because sometimes we tend to forget. The air we breathe, the food we eat, the ground we stand on, the people we love, the abilities we have—it's all from God. God is the Source.

A poll was recently conducted by the British Nutrition Foundation. They questioned 27,500 children and youth aged five to sixteen about the sources of food. According to a summary of the survey in a BBC article, almost a third of British primary pupils think cheese is made from plants, and a quarter think fish sticks come from chicken or pigs.

Nearly one in 10 secondary (high school) students thinks tomatoes grow underground.

The survey also revealed confusion about the source of staples such as pasta and bread among younger pupils, with about a third of five-to-eight-year-olds believing that they are made from meat. About 19 percent of this age group did not realize that potatoes did grow underground (unlike tomatoes), with 10% thinking they grew on bushes or trees.³ Somebody get these kids out on a farm!

Likewise, let's not be confused about the source of our blessings. The good things in life do not come from luck or fate or our own intelligence and skill (although sometimes we can develop our blessings into greater good things). Ultimately the Source of everything good is God. We owe our lives to God.

That should make us humble. Knowing that we are given our blessings by a loving heavenly Father—that just puts things in perspective, and the perspective is not “me in the middle.” True faith gives us an attitude, and that attitude is one not of arrogance or pride or self-righteousness, but an attitude of gratitude, humility and vulnerability. James says this, “*Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.*”⁴

Unfortunately, being full of religion can tend in the opposite direction. If we're not careful, we can feel like we're better than other people. We can be judgmental toward others who are “less Christian” than we are. Later in the text, James says this kind of religion is “worthless.” That's not true faith. Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*: “*Anyone who sets himself up as 'religious' by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air.*”⁵ True devotion to God looks like humility, love, and grace.

Many of you probably read the book *The Hiding Place* or the saw the movie years ago about Corrie Ten Boom's family. They risked their lives to save their Jewish neighbors from the Nazis during the opening days of WWII and ended up themselves in concentration camps. At one point in the book, Corrie and her sister were questioning their father about why so many of their neighbors, who professed to be Christians, were siding with the Nazis. Young Corrie observed, "They are part of the same church we are."

Pappa Ten Boom answered with wisdom, "Just because a mouse is in the cookie jar doesn't make it a cookie."⁶ I've also heard it said, "Walking into a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than walking into a garage makes you a car." Same idea.

If your faith is on your lips but not evident in your life, it's false. If your relationship with God is in your head, but not in your heart, it's worthless. If your religion is like a suit of clothes that you put on every Sunday and take off on Monday, then it's not going to get you through the week. That's not practical faith.

So what is practical faith? It's all about putting your devotion to God into action. "*You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves.*"⁷ You've heard this verse from James; it's one of his greatest hits. James says it's like looking in a mirror. Those who hear the word and don't do the word are like people who look in a mirror, then walk away, and two minutes later can't remember what they looked like. But those who hear the word and do the word reinforce the image of godliness, and they will stay focused and stay the course, no matter what comes. In the end, we will receive the blessing of God: "*They will be blessed in whatever they do.*"⁸ That's when the life of faith becomes real—when you become a doer of the word!

Pastor and author Kevin Miller remembers his junior high and high school years, growing up with a neighbor down the street named Beard Miller. He was no relation, but he was a widower and lived on his own. At one point he developed a very painful case of shingles.

One day Kevin's mom was praying, and she heard the Lord say to her, "Feed the hungry." She thought, How can I feed the hungry? Then she realized, I can make dinner and send it down the street for Beard.

Every night, she would make an extra amount of food. Then about 6:00, when the family was ready to sit down for dinner, she would put together a plate with Beard's dinner, a small bowl with salad, and a small plate with dessert. She would load all that into a large cardboard box lid that functioned as a serving tray, and then cover it with foil or a dishtowel to keep it warm.

Then she would look at Kevin and say, "Would you carry this down to Beard?" Kevin would walk down the street, knock on Beard's door and wait while he hobbled over and opened it. Beard always greeted Kevin with a big smile, because he knew that Kevin was bringing the best meal of the day by far.

Every single night for three years, until Beard's health declined, and he had to go to a nursing home, Kevin's mom made dinner for Beard. If she was out of town, she made sure someone took him food. She obeyed what the Lord had asked; she fed the hungry. She did the word. She was blessed, and so was her family.⁹

James says that it's just that kind of stuff—simple acts of kindness and love—that make a great faith: "*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.*"¹⁰ This is what Jesus called taking care of "the least of these,"—the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lonely, the dying—and often the way we treat those brothers and sisters of ours is the difference between true faith and false.

Caring for the least of these is a fundamental aspect of our Methodist DNA. We love to help people, to make a positive impact in our community, to serve human needs. Take this month, for instance. Last Sunday, we took an offering for hurricane relief. Our church is a collecting point for a truckload of flood buckets and hygiene kits.

Last Wednesday, nearly 200 people got together and packed 23,000 meals for hungry kids in our partner schools. This Sunday we are lifting up Foster Care and the need and opportunity for fostering in our community. This afternoon, a group of our church folks will serve a meal at the Salvation Army for the hungry and homeless in our community. Next week we will take an offering for the Sack Lunch program, a mission on the streets of Fort Smith that feeds needy people.

I'm not saying this to congratulate ourselves for all our good works. I'm also not saying we do this because we are just the nicest people on the planet. We may be, but the real reason we try to put our faith into action is because that is a fundamental part of our being disciples of Jesus. I'm saying that if we acknowledge God as the Source of all good gifts, if we live with the attitude of humility and gratitude, and if we put our devotion to God into action, then we will be champions of faith. We will be the MVP in our community. We will become more than we ever imagined we could be.

Dr. Mark Trotter, retired senior minister of First United Methodist Church in San Diego, CA, has a knack for finding great stories from the pages of history. He told one about the Spanish exploration expedition that sailed from Cuba in 1528 with 400 soldiers. Their intent was to find gold in Florida. They landed near what is now Tampa Bay, Florida. Between battles with the Native Americans, disease, and starvation, a couple hundred more perished in the first year of exploration. A small remnant decided to build barges and return home, but the currents and a hurricane blew them west to Texas. A couple of the barges survived the storm and landed near what is now Galveston, Texas. Initially the soggy Spaniards were welcomed by the Native Americans, but then the European diseases they brought created hostility. Finally three Spaniards and an African Muslim slave set out to walk through south Texas to Mexico City. Their arduous journey took another six or seven years, but they had some amazing encounters with native people along the way.

One of the three Spaniards was named Cabeza de Vaca, which in Spanish means “cow head.” He kept a journal of their travels and discoveries. He wrote that at one place, walking across the land, they came upon some Indians who asked them to cure their sick. These were the last four of the original 400 explorers. They were starving; they were lost; they were near despair. But the Indians, seeing their different skin color and strange clothing, thought they were gods possessing superhuman powers, so they begged them to cure the sick.

De Vaca knew he didn’t have such powers, but he also knew that they had to do something, or they would die. He wrote, “We prayed on bended knee and in the agony of hunger.” Then they stood up and blessed the sick. “To our amazement, they said they were well. We were more than we thought we were. To be more than I thought I was, was a sensation utterly new to me.”¹¹

That may be an utterly new sensation to you today as well. You can be more than you think you are. The Father of lights, the Creator of all things, has given you his gifts. You can be not just a hearer of the word, but a doer of the word. That is the life of practical faith. That is a life that makes a difference. That is what it is all about!

¹ Interview with Steve Kroft of *60 Minutes* (November 6, 2005), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-tom-brady-part-3/>.

² James 1:17.

³ Judith Burns, "'Cheese is from plant'—study reveals child confusion," BBC (6-3-13).

⁴ James 1:19-21.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 2203.

⁶ Roger W. Thomas, “The Real McCoy,” *sermoncentral.com*.

⁷ James 1:22.

⁸ James 1:25.

⁹ Kevin Miller, *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁰ James 1:27.

¹¹ No reference on the Mark Trotter sermon. But cf. Frasar, James W., *By the People; A History of the United States* (Boston: Pearson, 2015), 42f.