

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Pure Religion”  
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Ordinary 22-September 2, 2018

Lessons: James 1:17-27

Dennis Sanders writes that his first piano teacher, Mr. Jackson, was the best. Sanders didn't like him. “He was a stern teacher, and in my 11-year-old mind, I thought he was just plain mean. At your lesson, Mr. Jackson expected that you had practiced the assigned piece beforehand. He could tell if you hadn't practiced enough, and he responded with cutting remarks that left you devastated.

“He believed that if you were going to play piano, you were going to work for it. That meant practicing--daily. And it paid off. The two years I was with him, I think I played some of my best piano ever.

“James tells his readers to not only hear the word, but also put it into action. He likens those who hear the word but don't take it to heart to someone who looks in the mirror and then forgets what they look like as they walk away. As for those who hear the word and take it to heart, they actually put it into practice in their daily lives.

“This,” Sanders says, “is what discipleship is all about: it's taking what we learn in the hearing of the word of God and putting it into practice. We don't do this to earn points to get on God's good side. We practice because of what God has done in Jesus, and because we want to be followers of Christ.

“I got a new piano teacher a few years later. I loved that he wasn't as strict as Mr. Jackson. But he let me get away with not practicing much at all. I was never as good on the ivories as when I was with Mr. Jackson. Practice really does make perfect.”<sup>1</sup>

Our women's Bible study spent this past Spring studying the Letter of James. It is the letter least liked by Martin Luther who famously referred to it as an epistle of straw. James is the one who calls us to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” In recent times James would appreciate the mantra that we are called to walk the walk and not simply talk the talk. Practice. Practice. Practice!

“A number of years ago, I heard Professor Tex Sample speak at conference. He told us that he'd been married for quite a few years and that the last thing he did, before leaving to come to that conference was to kiss his wife. In all their years together they had remained faithful, not, he suggested because they were somehow better or more loving than other couples, but rather because they *practiced* their commitment on a regular on-going basis. He then challenged the church to *practice* its commitment to God and to the world. He suggested that too often people claim the title Christian, but then don't practice it. He offered the example of baseball: imagine talking to someone who tells you he is a baseball player. So you ask him where he plays. “Well actually I don't play on a team right now.” “So where do you practice?” “I don't.” The guy might have been a baseball player once, Sample said, but right now, he isn't. Professor Sample suggested that we needed to remember that metaphor in the church. How many people claim the title Christian, and then don't play on a team, or practice throughout the week? Maybe they were Christians once, but right now are they?

So what does it look like to practice? James offers some powerful examples. *Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.* Those words are needed today. We are not particularly gifted listeners. Sometimes we get so eager to

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Sanders, Practice, Practice, Practice. In The Christian Century, August 27, 2015 © 2015.

win an argument that we listen only to gain advantage rather than to focus on fully understanding another person. Think of how we might be as a nation today if people of every political stripe actually took the time to listen to the experience and outlook of others. If we were slower to speak and faster to listen, we might not be so angry in our country right now. James is perhaps a little harsh about this. *If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.* How might we become better listeners? Practice. Practice. Practice.

One of my heroes in the faith is not someone you'd recognize. He didn't write theological books or teach in seminary. I couldn't quote him here but I can tell you how he made people feel. Tom Beal was a middle school English teacher and a neighbor in New Hampshire who had an exceptional ability to listen. He really wanted to know what was happening in our lives. In his presence, he was so focused on us, that we felt valued. We knew he cared about us. He made us feel good about ourselves and also through his listening, he encouraged us to be better people. In his own way he lived out what Fred Rogers once wrote: "More and more I've come to understand that listening is one of the most important things we can do for one another. Whether the other be an adult or a child, our engagement in listening to who that person is can often be our greatest gift. Whether that person is speaking or playing or dancing, building or singing or painting, if we care, we can listen."<sup>2</sup> So be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But listening is not the whole story. Yes we are called to be better listeners and yes we are also called to be doers. *Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.* We have work to do as followers of Jesus Christ in the world today. It isn't enough to claim Jesus as your savior. It isn't enough to come to church. It isn't enough simply to know the word, to pray about the word, to listen to the word, James calls us to practice the word. *Religion*, he says, *that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.* Pure religion is to care for orphans and widows in their distress. Doing so is one of the most important things we can do. Let me share one more word from Mr. Rogers: "When I was a boy I used to think that *strong* meant having big muscles, great physical power; but the longer I live, the more I realize that real strength has much more to do with what is *not* seen. Real strength has to do with helping others."<sup>3</sup>

One of the very first times of contention in the church was when people within the community of faith began to complain that widows were being neglected, and from that complaint, the role of deacon was formed. You can read about it in Acts chapter 6. Pure religion is caring for orphans and widows in their distress. As one colleague has written, "The ultimate test of our faith is how we take care of the most vulnerable, the most powerless among us."<sup>4</sup> Caring for them is one way to be a doer and not just a hearer of the word.

As we begin a new season in the life of this church, let your faith grow by listening and by doing.

Let us pray: O God, give us the strength to live out your love, doing your word, caring for the weak and vulnerable in their distress, and ever pursuing the reign of justice, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers. *The World According to Mister Rogers*. © 2003 Family Communications, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace Bubar, Sunday, September 2, 2012: James 1:17-27 in *The Christian Century*, August 21, 2012. © 2012.