

YouTube It! *James 1:17-27* | 9/2/2018

Most of us remember learning to drive a car as an arduous process involving swerving around a parking lot with mom or dad, heading to the DMV, taking a written test and nervously navigating the road with a state trooper or driving instructor tracking our every move. All of that practice and instruction was rewarded with a driver's license and its accompanying sense of freedom. But what if you could skip all that hassle and just "YouTube it" instead?

That's what an 8-year-old boy in Ohio did on one recent Sunday night. He had a problem: mom and dad had fallen asleep early, and the boy and his 4-year-old sister were hungry for some McDonald's. The golden arches were a mile and a half away — too far for a walk in the dark. So the boy did what any self-respecting Gen-Z kid would do when faced with a problem. He looked up "How to drive a car" on YouTube, emptied his piggy bank, then bundled his sister into the car and headed out for a cheeseburger. Police said later that the boy obeyed all the traffic laws, didn't hit a single thing, and drove "effortlessly" through town as though he had been driving for years — all because he watched a few minutes of video instruction and then did precisely what it said to do.

Our pint-sized adventurer seems to have grasped early on what many of us grasped much later in life. Which is that, on the internet, someone somewhere has created a video to show you how to do what you're about to attempt. Whether it's a repair for your home or your car, how to put on makeup, learning self-defense or making dinner, all you need to do is look it up on the world's most popular video site and soon you'll be an expert yourself. Of course, all this instruction depends on your willingness to experiment and put the information into practice. Without that, it's just another internet time-waster.

People in the ancient world obviously didn't have YouTube. Most of their learning was accomplished by watching someone model the activity in question face to face or by receiving a letter from a distant instructor (which took way longer than even dial-up internet service!).

So James wrote this letter to Jewish Christians who were caught up in the social tensions of the mid-first century, where outbreaks of violence and insurrection were taking place in Judea — a conflict that would culminate in the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-70. In fact, the whole Roman world was dealing with unrest, including economic problems, food shortages, and the rapid turnover of Roman emperors that led to an erratic government policy toward Christians, Jews and others.

The problem facing the church in that time of uncertainty can be summed up something like this: "How do we remain a faithful Christian community in the midst of this time of trial and temptation?" James wrote to encourage his brothers and sisters and to give them some instruction on how to navigate in difficult times.

Faithfulness must be practiced. James made clear *that no amount of instruction matters unless it is put into practice.* James wanted the church to become experts not only in hearing the instruction, but doing the instruction as well.

"Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (v. 12). James saw the current situation as a time of testing for the Christian community, but also an opportunity to demonstrate faithfulness.

Faithfulness will often be challenged or tested. For James, this time of testing was not something that God had thrown down in front of his people to break them. Rather it was a "gift" that God had given to his people — a chance to shine in the midst of a dark world as the new creation that God had brought forth in the death and resurrection of Jesus (vv. 13-17).

Faithfulness is rooted in the trustworthiness of God. In the Greco-Roman world, many people consulted astrology and the alignment of the stars to help determine their course of action. James called the church to remember that they have been given the "perfect gift" of God: the "Father of lights" and the one who actually created the stars in the first place.

Unlike the changeable nature of events in the present world, there is “no variation or shadow due to change” in God’s nature (v. 17). God and the word of God are the only reliable sources of information for the church.

Faithfulness is also grounded in the word. With that “word of truth” in mind, James then turns to the problem at hand and lays down a quick take on how to manage oneself while the world seems to be spinning out of control. It’s tempting to give into anger, revenge and nasty words. But James says, “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (vv. 19-20).

Faithfulness puts the word into action. So how does that word get activated in one’s life? James says that you have to practice it. “But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (v. 22). The purpose of receiving instruction, receiving the “word of truth,” is to put the information into practice. If, say, I watch a YouTube video on how to fix a leaky faucet but never pull out the tools and get to work putting what I’ve learned to good use, then I will still be stuck with a constant drip. If I just watch the video and say, “Yeah, I’ll get back to that sometime,” I’ll quickly forget everything I’ve learned.

James says the same thing happens when we only *hear* the Word of God and don’t put it into practice. It’s as though we looked at ourselves in a mirror briefly and then walked away, almost instantly forgetting what we looked like. When we fail to take the Word we have received and put it instantly into practice, we can forget who God created us to be and our vocation as people created for God’s purposes.

If, on the other hand, we keep our focus on “the perfect law, the law of liberty,” and persevere in the midst of trial, being hearers *and* doers, we will be “blessed” in our doing. In fact, it’s the “doing” of the word that matters most for James (v. 25).

Finally, faithfulness is easier when we’re in fellowship with a community. Some YouTube tutorials don’t convey the information in a way that’s easy to follow. Try tying a bow tie while watching a video or looking at a chart, for example. It’s extremely difficult because that mirror image forces you to do everything backwards. To tie that bow tie effectively *you need someone standing beside you to show you how*, guiding your fingers and helping you develop the internal memory of the process until it becomes second nature.

The same is true for real “religion,” says James. It’s not simply about running at the mouth and declaring one’s faith as a matter of intellectual belief; nor is it about lashing out at those who might be challenging you (v. 26). Religion that is “pure and undefiled before God,” on the other hand, is religion that is demonstrated in practice — practice that comes as second nature to those who have internalized the word of truth.

It is religion, in other words, that uses the model of Jesus for both its belief and its practice. Like tying that bow tie, there are some things YouTube just can’t teach. It can’t teach you how to be a follower of Jesus. Oh, sure, it can teach you the *principles* of discipleship, but to really learn it you have to have someone live it out in front of you and guide you along the way. Information alone won’t get it; it takes imitation as well.

That’s why we need a community of faith to guide us and give us examples for putting the word into practice. In a culture where there is plenty of social upheaval, we must see the opportunity to be shining stars that reflect God’s glory rather than lash out in fear or join in the culture’s calamity. We shine most brightly when we are doing the Word of God in a way that causes others to see us and want to be instructed in how to do the same.

An 8-year-old learned to drive perfectly by watching a tutorial video and then grabbing the keys. All the motivation he needed was found in the prospect of a Happy Meal. May we be motivated to take the instruction we have been given by the word of truth and put it into practice. More than a Happy Meal, it might help us make a Happier World.

Pastor Keith