

## **"Just Looking"**

**James 1: 17-27** 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created. 19 My dear brothers, <sup>and sisters</sup> take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 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 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 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. 26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 27 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.

### **The Christian life is much more than "just looking."**

Does your job require you to work on commission? To someone who works on commission, there are few more disheartening words from a customer than when in response to a polite "May I help you?" one hears "No thanks, I'm just looking."

"Just looking" -- What it mostly means is "Go away, I have no intention of buying anything here." Sometimes we go "just looking" because we're bored. We cruise the malls looking in one shop after another, simultaneously overwhelmed by all the choices before us and uninterested in what seems to be just "more of the same." Now I will admit that sometimes I just don't want to be bothered by a sales person because most of the time I know exactly what I came in to the store to buy. Some of us guys are like that, some guys, if they had their way, would never set foot in a store if they didn't know what they were looking for. I mean, we are on a mission, get in, get what we want and get out. But that is a generalization. There are times when I will go into a Music Store and browse for hours knowing that I can't afford to buy anything. But I am researching for when I do have money. *even if that never happens.*

Sometimes we go "just looking" to sneak a peek at all those things that are beyond our reach. Have you ever looked at guns, guitars, sewing machines, tools, *fabric, yarn, books,* or something that you knew you could never afford just to look? Or have you ever *Cars,* walked through the showroom of a Porsche dealership, checking out the latest models you won't ever be buying? Or maybe you prefer trying on a few diamonds, rubies, or emeralds just to see how they look on your finger? "Sorry, just looking."

But there is another side. The sales people who are working on commission need to have someone buy from them or they don't make any money. Sales people, working on commission hate the "just looking" people because they take up time in some cases and never produce any income. Now some people have the attitude, they should just get a different job, but think about it, that is much easier said than done. I remember when Amy and I were on our honeymoon cruise to Jamaica. <sup>just 26 years ago</sup> The excursion leader told us to say, "Me don't want it mon," if we wanted the street salespeople to leave us alone. I distinctly remember the face that the street vendor to whom I first spoke that phrase. He looked like he just bit into a sour, bitter grapefruit and muttered, your tour guide told you to say that. The guy was angry. To him, the tour guide was hurting his opportunity to make a living. [Note 1] *they don't put food on the table.*

But for some people, "just looking" is an excuse. They spend all their lives "just looking" -- never willing to invest their energies or emotions or economic security in anything because of the risks involved. People who are permanently "just looking" drift in and out of jobs without ever finding a vocation; they drift in and out of relationships without ever daring to love or commit; they drift in and out of communities without ever casting a vote or dropping anchor; and they drift in and out of the church without ever opening their hearts to the spirit of God or feeling the pulse of Christ's body.

The text from James today reveals the author obviously felt a similar sense of frustration with would-be Christians who were bystanders and bench-warmers. How many of you have ever experienced being on a sports or competition team and spent the whole event on the bench? Was it fun? I remember feeling worthless, not good enough, and discouraged. By his actions the coach or manager makes a person feel worthless, without value. James reminds us that just hearing the word, the good news of Jesus Christ, is not enough. We must be "doers who act." *I hated my Freshman year - hardly played at all.*

Several years ago, I heard the story of Larry Walters, a 33-year-old man who decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. He went down to the local army surplus store one morning and bought 45 used weather balloons. That afternoon, he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied the now helium-filled balloons. He took along a six-pack of beer, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land.

Walters, who assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air, was caught off guard when the chair soared more than 11,000 feet into the sky -- smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport. Too frightened to shoot any of the balloons, he stayed airborne for more than two hours forcing the airport to shut down its runways for much of the afternoon, causing long delays in flights from across the country. [Note 2]

Soon after he was safely grounded and cited by the police, reporters asked him three questions: "Were you scared?" ... "Yes."

"Would you do it again?" ... "No."

"Why did you do it?" ... "Because," he said, "you can't just sit around and do nothing." --Gary Gonzales, "Raising Your Creativity Quotient," Leadership 14 (Summer 1993), 35.

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 Jerusalem and surrounding areas. 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. 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.* The letter reads like a series of random tutorial videos on the Christian life, but in this section 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.

The following story comes from the annals of The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. The Pastor at the time of the story was Gordon Cosby.

I share it as an example of a church willing to listen to God

"The irrational decision sometimes, when bathed in prayer, has the wings of the Holy Spirit. The quickest illustration to come to mind is our decision to buy Dayspring Farm. Buying Dayspring was an irrational decision by anybody's fiscal notebook. We couldn't have done a sillier thing than to buy Dayspring. We had just bought our building at 2025 Massachusetts Avenue. I think we had 15 or 20 members. Only half of them were employed in paying jobs. And we owed \$100,000 on this building."

But the Spirit was moving within the members of this congregation, in ways mysterious and unsettling to Cosby himself. Individual members began coming forward with checks, small but sacrificial, urging Cosby to begin the search for an out-of-town location for a prayer and retreat ministry. Against his better judgment Cosby appointed a committee and they began searching for property.

"Now you know the farm they found, which we got for \$35,000 or \$37,000 for 180 acres in Montgomery County. We sat on the floor and prayed. Then we unanimously voted to do that idiotic, irrational thing. We owed \$100,000. We did not have a clue as to how to finance our little church. We were in a brand new building. And we voted to spend \$37,000 on a retreat farm. Suppose we hadn't done it. We did pray. It was decision bathed in prayer, beginning with the two people who gave checks. Within a year, the Atomic Energy Commission decided to relocate and to move to a site one mile from Dayspring.

Before anyone set foot on our property, within a year it was worth a \$500,000. Now much more. Had we waited until it made fiscal sense, would we ever have had Dayspring? Of course not." [Note 3]

Sometimes, if the prayer life is deep enough, decisions which seem irrational are bathed with a kind of wonder. This is true for individuals. It is certainly true with churches. --From "Mary's Teaching," Ministry of Money Newsletter, (Washington, D.C.: Church of the Saviour, October 1993).

Am I proposing we do something crazy tomorrow? NO! But I am saying that this passage of Scripture in James tells us that it is not enough just to read the Bible and be happy, comfortable, and satisfied. I say this fully realizing that 10-30% of our family is not even reading their Bible regularly so that is the next baby step they need to make. Those of us who are reading our Bibles regular need to be challenged by James to do something about it. Don't get me wrong I am just as human and messed up as the rest of you. I missed two days reading the Bible this last week and not once did I write anything in my journal. God doesn't expect us all to be perfect. He calls us to do something, to take another baby step this week.

*If means, being willing & able to step out in faith - or even be listening closely enough to hear God*

[Note 4] It is so easy in our culture to let complacency ooze, slide, and slip into our lives without fanfare and take over our lives. I'm old, it's time for somebody younger to take over. Please, show me in the Bible where there is an example of somebody retiring from serving God. Some of us who manage to avoid complacency convince ourselves that we will take the next step when we get the right education, when I finish this book, when I have read the gospels, when the kids move out, when my grandchildren graduate from high school, you fill in the blank. We desire to wait till we have a plan or the timing is right.

A Biblical faith finds plenty of precedence for action without a plan, but very little evidence of plans without action.

- Abraham didn't have a plan ... but he packed up and left home.
- Moses didn't have a clue ... but he confronted Pharaoh with an ultimatum.
- Rahab didn't have a friend ... but she hid Joshua's spies to Jericho.
- Elijah didn't have a hope ... but he defeated all the prophets of Ba'al.
- Nehemiah didn't have a country ... but he rebuilt the Wall of Jerusalem.
- Mary didn't have a name ... but she bore the Son of God.
- John the Baptist didn't have a home ... but he made the wilderness his pulpit.
- Peter didn't have a backbone ... but he became the "rock" of the church.
- Saul of Tarsus didn't have a heart ... but Paul became the spokesman for the Gentiles.
- Jesus didn't have a sin ... but he suffered and died on the cross for our sake and our salvation.

~~Quesada~~ Faithful Christians must be doing, not "just looking." The whole crux of faith is that we don't know every detail, every contingency, every possible development that awaits us. But we do know who is in charge. A life of faith demands we work hard but know that ultimately God is in control.

Thumb through the Old and New Testaments and try to find God speaking

through planners. Notice how the people God used to put God's love and deliverance into action are instead called prophets. As Christians, those who have heard the word and are called to act upon it, we are not to plan but to prophesy our way forward in life. When we prophesy our way forward, our faith is not in demographics or flow charts, in financing schemes or economic trends -- our faith is in the power of the Holy Spirit. When we prophesy our way forward, the way is not always clear; the risks are real; the commitment required is total; and the results may surprise us. When we prophesy our way forward, no one is "just looking" -- no one is just along for the ride. Everyone must get out and push when the going get tough. In the big "C" Church in general we tend to hear God's call and then get education, make a plan, and then MAYBE get around to doing something, sometime, maybe.

So my point is, NOT go out & do crazy things on a whim that God might be leading that way But also don't get complacent and so satisfied that you don't even pay attention

[Note 5]

A community of faith that would prophesy its way forward for Christ's sake must be willing to listen to the Spirit and trust in its power. The hot and sweaty slogan of the Nike company, "Just Do It" isn't quite right. In the church we don't "just do it," we "just pray it." That's why I use the phrase, "pray ourselves to our potential." It is in the power of a Spirit-filled closeness with God's desires that the church begins to see the shape of its future. That kind of closeness is possible only through prayer -- the Christian's conduit to God.

Old Testament prophets were constantly conversing with God. The prayers prophets breathed up to God: of praise, confusion, anger, fright, anguish and joy kept them motivated and kept them moving. It was only on those occasions when the prophet lost contact with God -- through cowardice or indecision or stubbornness -- that the prophetic witness became muted and mired down.

*Faithfulness* puts God's Word into demonstrable and visible 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 really want to fix the problem, I need to set up my phone next to the sink and follow along step by step with the video.

On the other hand, 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. Only the very wealthy had access to a mirror in the ancient world (and it was usually made of bronze and not very effective). Forgetting one's image was easy to do. When we fail to take the word we have received and put it instantly into practice, building a kind of spiritual muscle memory, then we forget who God created us to be and our vocation as people created for God's purposes (vv. 23-24).

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). [Note 6]

Legend has it that a Christian believer who had been lost at sea washed up on the shore of a remote native village. Half-dead from starvation, exposure and sea water, he was discovered unconscious by the people of the village and was slowly nursed back to full health. He lived thereafter among the people for some 20 years. During his time with them, he lived out his Christian faith. However, he uttered no sacred songs. He preached no pietistic sermons. He neither read nor recited Scripture in public. He made no personal faith claims whatsoever - except by his actions.

When people were sick, he visited them, sitting long hours into the night. When people were hungry, he gave them some of his own food. When people were lonely, he kept them company. He taught the children. He always took sides with those who had been wronged. There were few, if any, human conditions with which he didn’t identify.

After 20 years passed, missionaries came from the sea to the village and began talking to the people about a man called “the Christ.” After hearing of this “Jesus,” the natives insisted that he’d been living among them for the past 20 years. “Come,” they demanded, “we’ll introduce you to the man about whom you’ve been speaking!” [Note 7]

Use the model of Jesus for both your belief and your practice. 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.

Can the church stand as an exciting alternative to a "just looking" culture? Are we willing to trust in the spirit and dive in? What paths lie ahead of our church that are calling us to prophesy our way forward? What does it look like to “pray ourselves to our potential.” It certainly doesn’t look like reading the Bible and saying to ourselves, “oh, that’s interesting,” and never doing anything about it. Just pray it. Don’t be a “just looking” Christian. Let’s go and do, let devoted Christ-follower be who we be, let it define who we are. Let’s pray ... AMEN

**Sermon Notes for “Just Looking” based on James 1: 17-27**  
**Given at Doster Community Church on June 4, 2023**

- I. Are we thinking, looking and acting like we are “just looking,” when it comes to spiritual things and Doster Church?
- II. What is God calling us to do? What is He calling us to feel or to think? If we decide to do more than just look, what is it that God is calling you to?
- III. Are we actually ready to spend some time, some money, some talent or gifting on spiritual things? On Doster Church? On our community? I believe God is calling us to do that. We are starting to do that.
- IV. The whole crux of faith is that we don’t get to know every detail, every contingency, but we do know who is in charge. A life of faith demands we work hard but know that ultimately God is in control.
- V. Our faith is in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ. Just pray it!
- VI. Which is more true of you and your attitude toward God, Jesus Christ and the church family of Doster Community church: “I have a dream” OR “I had a dream”?? Ask the Lord to restore in you a dream, a vision, of what Doster Church could be!
- VII. What are you going to do about it? Are you willing to trust the Spirit and dive into the deep end and get involved? How might we stand out as an exciting alternative to our “just looking” culture! What is your “I will \_\_\_\_\_ statement for this week?