

It Takes Practice (James 5:13-20)

Practice. It's not a word people like much, is it? Practice.

Doing feels much better than ***practicing***, right?

I heard an interview some years ago with Ray Charles on the occasion of his 67th birthday. He was releasing a 5 CD collection of his songs, celebrating his 50 years in the music business. The interviewer said, "Ray, do you still practice after all these years?"

Ray said, "I try to practice everyday."

"What do you practice? The songs you'll be playing in concert?"

"No. No. No. No. No. I practice scales and chords and movements. I practice to improve. I already ***know*** the songs I'm

going to play in concert. I practice to be able to play the songs I'll play **someday**."

But that's tough, isn't it? We live in a society that wants things done **now**. People don't want to have to spend all that time getting it right; they want satisfaction instantly. People would love to be marathoners, lose 30 pounds, learn a new language—but it's the **getting there** that's the tough part.

Wasting all that time getting it right. Come on. It'd be better if we were already excellent guitar players or sculptors or lawyers or accountants.

Wouldn't it be nice to call ourselves those things, and have that be enough? Not have to practice?

Think about it, we have in this country an infatuation with antibiotics. Doctors are over-prescribing all sorts of drugs ... but antibiotics in particular. People who have a cold or other viral

infection demand antibiotics (even though antibiotics won't touch viral infections).

(And don't even get me started on Horse paste and malaria medicine.)

But because of this antibiotic obsession we've got problems: drug resistant bacteria from over-prescribing antibiotics. Instead of enduring some discomfort now, people would rather take a magic pill in the hopes that it will make all their ailments disappear. Instead of some Kleenex and chicken soup, people convince themselves that there must be a way of avoiding all the misery. Except it doesn't work because antibiotics treat bacterial infections, not viruses. So, now we've got all kinds of problems that are going to be really difficult to fix.

But what do we expect in the land of Jiffy-Lubes and micro-wave ovens? We want what we want, and we want it now. Who wants

to wait? Who wants to have to endure the drudgery of practice, and work?

People want what they want when they want it—all packaged and delivered with as little expenditure of their own energy as possible.

Christianity, which exists in this same culture, is often no exception. The idea of being Christian is still fairly popular—though much less so than even a few years ago—but the actual living of it isn't **nearly** as appealing. James anticipates this. He begins his letter by saying, "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22).

Which is to say, James isn't impressed with the tendency to want our faith served to us in bite-sized, pre-digested nuggets that don't put any strain on our gastrointestinal system.

Easy tips, helpful hints about how to be nicer people, how to hold back the darkness that inevitably descends on all of us. Worship that makes people feel better about lives filled with too much stuff and too little care for others.

Evangelism that seeks to swell the rolls and increases the budget, but doesn't ask folks to commit to living as if God's new creation and its commitment to peace and justice were already here.

Easy believe-ism that doesn't ask people to repent of their racism, homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia, but tells them that all they need to do is salute the flag, oppose gay wedding cakes, and avoid sleeping with the wrong people.

You wouldn't believe the amount of email I get purporting to tell me how our church, without any real effort, can bring people through the doors in droves. A flashy web site here, a hip new program there, and pretty soon we'll have people flocking to "find

out what's happening at Douglass Boulevard Christian Church." If only we'd expand our parking, or retool the music, or serve lattes in the narthex, or make the sermons more "relevant," we'd have so many people we wouldn't know what to do with them all.

Now that we're in the midst of a pandemic, and we're worshiping online the message has changed a bit. All we need is for me to pay more money to sit in on Zoom conferences and webinars that will unlock the secret of widening our appeal through the magic of online worship production.

Do you see the logic?

Just a few adjustments, 5 simple steps, and the church doesn't ever have to break a sweat to live like Jesus.

Pretty enticing, isn't it? If you listen to the folks who're making a living at selling gospel riches, you don't really have to work—no practice involved. So simple **anyone** can do it.

For just a few dollars, a small donation, really, you too can watch your membership explode!

But James isn't sold on that line of thinking. James says, "You've got to act like a follower of Jesus."

Now, there's a novel idea. We've got to do things that Jesus' followers do. We've got to pray and sing. The elders need go to the sick. We must live in community, live up to our responsibility for looking out for one another. James doesn't give us any quick tips.

You want to follow Jesus? You've got to practice. There's no eighteen days to a "New-Christian-You."

No. It takes a lifetime. And even after we've been at it for fifty years, we'll **still** have to practice to improve.

But James says that the upshot of it all is that our determination to live the disciplined lives that followers of Jesus are called to live, just may pull somebody back from the edge. Do the little things: pray, minister to those in need, love and heal one another's brokenness—live like Jesus, and we just may be the light that pulls someone back from the darkness.

James doesn't tell us to get all the words right. James doesn't ask us to get Ph.D.'s in Biblical Studies. James doesn't require us all to become pastors (which, I think we can all agree, is a good thing—because who needs that kind of scrutiny, all those nosey ministers wandering around, am I right?)

James says, “Live like you actually believe Jesus is who he said he was,” and that’s the greatest testimony you’ll ever give.

According to James, we’re not called to **believe** the right things, **say** the right things, or have the right bumper stickers on our cars. According to James, our job is live like Jesus asked us to live.

Simple. Do the things Jesus did and people will see Jesus standing right in front of them. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, bind up the broken-hearted, give voice to those who have no voice, sing with those who sing, mourn with those who mourn, heal the sick, pray and cry and laugh and confess your sins—because Lord knows we’ve all got plenty to confess. And the miracle of it is, when the church begins to act like Jesus—it’s its own best advertisement.

And we don't do any of those things because by doing them we'll be successful, attract hoards of young families pulling trailers full of cash into our parking lot. We live like Jesus because it's the right thing to do—because Jesus asked us to.

You see, praying, going out to lay healing hands on someone who's broken, showing hospitality to those who are different from us, or loving our enemies is our vocation. It's a way of shining a light in a world filled with the shadows of violence and the emptiness of a society in which too many people simply don't care about anything or anyone but themselves.

We can't pay someone to do what God wants **us** to do. True Christianity, at least according to James, has no stake in marketing the church in a way that says to the world that it's painless and easy to follow Jesus or that if we take up with Jesus we'll find the seven-step plan to a healthy psyche.

We can't just **believe** stuff. People want to know what difference these beliefs make in our lives. Do they help us feed the hungry, cloth the naked, or welcome the stranger? Does our faith open us up to embrace those who've been told over and over again that they're not good enough. Do the lives we lead bring hope and healing to those who've only experienced faith as a club to be wielded—and too often only against those who have the least ability to defend themselves?

Do our beliefs ask anything of **us** ... for **them**?

Following Jesus is a way of embodying the good news that God loves all of us. So that what people see is the new world God is creating—a world that's radically different from anything this often cold hard world is used to. It's a way of life that offers a powerful and sometimes strange challenge to do something as counter-intuitive as loving the people the rest of society tells us are okay to forget.

Following Jesus means that we're messengers of something. It means not only that we believe stuff **about** Jesus, but that we commit ourselves to **acting** like him so that others—who may very well be living in despair—might see what hope looks like by seeing our lives.

Will Willimon tells one of my favorite stories about a time when Tony Campolo came to speak at the Chapel at Duke. The day before he arrived, a young student, a freshman, asked Willimon if he could introduce Dr. Campolo. Willimon said, "Well, OK. But keep it short."

The student stood up on Sunday to introduce Campolo and told a story about the summer he worked with Dr. Campolo in Philadelphia.

He said: I grew up in a small Methodist church and was active in a high school youth group and last summer I went to a week long rally in Philadelphia where Tony Campolo was the speaker and we were in a downtown church and Campolo started preaching and he got us all fired up and said. "Now we're going to take Jesus to Philadelphia. Let's go get 'em."

And we all rushed outside and got on buses and went from a bad part of town to the **worst** part of town. We drove through vacant lots, bombed out tenements, broken windows, drug dealers, pimps—and we stopped in front of the worst slum housing section and Campolo opened the bus door and said, "Now go witness ... and I'll be back at 5:00 to pick you up."

We looked around at each other and silently got off the bus and parted, went our separate ways. The young man said, "I've never seen anything like this before and I picked an old run-down building and went in. I walked up one flight of stairs—the

hallways were dark, the stairs were in disrepair, babies could be heard crying, trash everywhere, and I knocked on a door.

"Who is it?"

"I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Well, I just want to talk."

This woman threw open the door, there were two naked children, one at her side, one in her arms and she said with a cigarette in her mouth, "What do you want?"

"Well, I want to talk to you about Jesus."

That woman cussed me down the hallway, cussed me down the stairs, cussed me out the front door, cussed me down the street.

She left. I wept. I **wanted** to do the right thing. Look at this mess. I'm just some kid from the suburbs who didn't know anything.

I walked down the street, found a boarded up, fortified store. As I walked in, I remembered two things; the children didn't have any diapers and she was smoking a cigarette. So, I bought a box of diapers and a carton of cigarettes and went back. I knocked on the door, "Who is it?"

The door flung open, and I shoved that box of pampers in there and those cigarettes—and she said, "Come in." So I opened up those pampers, put one on the baby, and one on the older child. She offered me a cigarette. I had never smoked one before, but I

did that day. I played with the baby; I stayed there the rest of the day.

4:30 that afternoon she said, "What are you **doing** here? Why did you come?" And so I started to tell her everything I knew about Jesus. It took about three minutes.

The young man said, "When I got through that day, Tony asked us, "Well, did you convert anybody?""

And I said, "Yeah ... me. You've made **me** a follower of Jesus."

I'm convinced we won't find the answers to the church's problems in gimmicks. I think the answer will be found in a community of people who are bold enough to live their faith in public, in a community of people who are bold enough to follow James' instruction to pray and minister to the suffering, to sing with those who sing, in a community of people who go out and seek to

heal the sick, who stand up for justice, who trust one another enough to tell the truth.

I'm convinced that the answer will be found in a community of people who are willing to give their lives to save a soul from the 1,001 ways people are dying every day while hoping to find someone who lives like they actually believe this whole Jesus-thing.

And, you know what? If you get in on this deal, you might find that the soul that's saved is ***your own***.

-Amen.