

“Homework for the Followers of Christ”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
on Sunday, September 2, 2018 by Elaine Brummer

Scripture Readings: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27

As we channel surf the television or flip through magazines, we are inundated by a flood of extravagant claims, such as: “Miracle Diet!” “Look younger in just two weeks!” “Read this book and you will become a millionaire!” The messages leap out at us. The products assure that they are new, improved, fantastic, and capable of changing our lives. For only a few dollars, we can have “happier lives,” “gorgeous bodies,” and “have abundant wealth.....” Automobiles, perfume, diet drinks and books are guaranteed to bring happiness, friends, and the good life. And just before an election, no one can match the politicians’ promises. But talk is cheap, and too often we soon realize that the boasts were hollow and quite far from the truth.

Christians also make great claims. We say things like: “Jesus is the answer!” “Believe in God and you will be cured!” or “I follow every commandment!” But often our actions contradict our claims. Although we profess to trusting God and to follow his Word, we cling tightly to the world and its values. We contradict the gospel by the way we live our lives.

We live in a success-oriented society. In fact, it could be argued that we are addicted to success. Most of us spend a great deal of our lives expecting constant affirmation, often of a material nature for what we do. How many of us would be content to remain in a job year after year without a raise or promotion? It is not enough for many of us to have a job with decent wages and reasonable vacation time; we feel that a whole list of “perks” is our **right**, that without such benefits we are being taken advantage of; our talents and skills are being undervalued.

Our culture influences us to want the best for ourselves and our children with “the best” defined in terms of material possessions and measurable achievements. We push ourselves and our children to excel not for the sake of stretching ourselves and being all that God has called us to be, but far more we seek excellence for its rewards. Being a good soccer player is okay; being the captain of the teams brings a shine to a proud parent’s eyes. “Captain” is an honor. Being the best salesperson with a company, trusted by your customers, valued for your integrity, courtesy, and unparalleled service is okay; being Vice-President in charge of Sales makes us worthy in the world’s eyes. Status is so important that we willingly buy into worldly attitudes that make it respectable to describe our job as “food service technician” rather than “waitress” or “Office Administrator” instead of “secretary.”

This attitude can be particularly dangerous for the Christian seeking to mature his or her faith. There are few, if any, material rewards for seeking to know and follow God’s will because it runs so often counter to society’s definitions of success. God is not at all concerned with whether one of his followers is the president of a corporation or “only” a janitor.

As Christians we need to step back from the constant worldly pressures, messages and agendas, and put ourselves in the place where our faith in God provides the context in which we make all our decisions: familial, political, professional and economical.

Fortunately the letter from James has rich meaning for us as we are reminded that genuine faith transforms lives. It states, "My dear brothers and sisters take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires... ..Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says... ..Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless." (James 1:19-26)

My Life Application Bible offers this commentary on the above verses: "When we talk too much and listen too little, we communicate to others that we think our ideas are much more important than theirs. James wisely advises us to reverse this process. Put a mental stopwatch on your conversations and keep track of how much you talk and how much you listen. When people talk with you, do they feel that their viewpoints and ideas have value? It is important to listen to what God's Word says, but it is much more important to obey it, to **do** what it says. We can measure the effectiveness of our Bible study time by the effect it has on our behavior and attitudes. Do you put into action what you have studied? What you say and what you don't say are both important. Proper speech is not only saying the right words at the right time, but it is also controlling your desire to say what you shouldn't. (pp. 2735 & 2738.)

I'd like to read Rev. Susan Tough's reflection called "Word Power" from the book "Lamentations for Lent."

The letter from James gives us concrete advice on how to put our faith into action. It is easy to say we have faith, but true faith will produce loving action toward others.

When we commit ourselves to tithing, it is a choice consistent with our Christian faith. It is not something that deserves a pat on the back. When we volunteer once a month in the soup kitchen, we should not need public recognition for that choice.

With the disciples we often pray, "O Lord, increase our faith," but too often we are unwilling to participate in that spiritual growth. Faith is increased, becomes stronger and more vital, only with constant use. Faith is the daily practice of being in God's presence intentionally with every choice we make. Faith is "listening to the word, and then doing what it says."

Each day I pray and ask God to help me be more patient and to think carefully before I speak. Each day I feel confident that I will be able to achieve this small goal. That is, until I get into my car. It only takes a few minutes before someone cuts in front of me, or is driving so s-l-o-w-l-y in front of me that I forget my good intentions and I am gesturing impatiently, or even worse, saying words that I am not proud of.

In her book "Daily Grace" author Marianne Williamson suggests that we should spend five minutes in praise and worship in the mornings before we start our days, and that if we did so it could save hours of tears shed later over something we have said or done. She says, "Every morning... See God's Light around your co-workers, your neighbours, your children, your spouse. Whatever it is you will be doing with your day - whatever your workplace or

activity - consciously bless the people you'll meet, as well as those you don't even know. Remember to include those you don't like as well as those you do." (Williamson, p. 79-80)

People who are serious about increasing their spiritual maturity practice "listening to the word, and then doing what it says." It is an hourly, daily, commitment. They are people of faith not because they are people of belief only, but because they are people of action in God's name.

The employee who resists the temptation to take home an ink cartridge refill from the office, the person who says "no" to a party invitation which conflicts with a prior commitment to work at the homeless shelter and the customer who returns the excess change given by the cashier are all people of faith. They grow in their faith not by confronting immense challenges occasionally, but by making small and steady choices day after day after day.

When Jesus speaks about faith being able to move mountains, he is not only speaking about geological occurrences. He is speaking about the seemingly impossible, becoming possible through choice and practice. Followers of Jesus who want to mature their faith learn how to be faithful by being faithful in the smallest, most mundane ways first, making faith a cherished companion. Gradually the little things become habits, one is honest because to be anything else is unthinkable; one is generous because one sees oneself as a steward of God's gifts, a channel of God's grace; one is courteous because love is our mandate as Christians.

Our faith, strengthened and renewed by daily use, and our intentional commitment to live and act in accordance with God's word, will make God's kingdom not only possible, but actual; not in some future heaven, but on earth right here, right now.

AMEN