

The St. John's Pulpit

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RELIGIOUS WORK

James 1:17-27

September 2, 2018 Message 1 of 5 in Series Entitled,
*'Actively Faithful Faithfully Active Living:
Learning to Live by Characteristics of God's Spirit of Love'*

*What should you do when you're not sure what you should be doing?
How can you offer clarity to others while surrounded by uncertainty and
ambiguity?
When new information changes your situation and your view of yourself, how do
you respond?*

You may have heard about the couple with one biological son, Marty, and one adopted son, Billy. The parents were explaining to Billy what it meant for him to be adopted. They explained that Marty was born to them, not adopted, yet they dearly loved Billy as their own son. They told him how he had been chosen and welcomed into their family. When they finished, Billy asked, *'Can we adopt Marty too?'*

Billy received new information that changed his world and his view of himself. With the honesty of a child, he expressed joy which is a characteristic of active faith.

He desired for others to experience this same clarity of being blessed.

Today, you are pursuing Actively Faithful Faithfully Active Living in a world of rapid change.

The complexities and constant flow of information can increase uncertainty and confusion.

In 1922, when St. John's was founded, there were fewer than 2 billion residents of planet earth and less than 35% of American homes had a telephone. Today, we have 7.5 billion people and we can know what is going on with almost all of them instantaneously. These exponential changes at rapid speeds increase anxiety and uncertainty.

Anxiety and uncertainty can cause people to shrink in fear, or to disengage or to invest in faith.

Some people retreat into a faith that is doctrinal, formulaic and legalistic to avoid perplexity. Their mantra is, *"I have my faith figured out."* They are ideological fundamentalists. Others try to opt out of engaging in faith at all; only to transfer faith to other people or causes. And, some, like you, live with uncertainty by choosing to invest in active faith; an actively faithful relationship with God lived by faithfully active service in relation to others. You are some of the people who offer clarity in an age of increasing anxiety and uncertainty. You know faith is God's gift to you which develops within you as you open your spirit to God's Holy Spirit.

James, the brother of Jesus, would appreciate our phrase, 'Actively Faithful Faithfully Active.'

In his Letter to scattered pilgrims, during the first century, he taught about a faith that works.

James challenges us to be involved in Religious Work, by living as ‘*doers of the word.*’

During the first century, as followers of Jesus were being punished and persecuted because of their commitments, they started scattering in what James called a ‘dispersion.’ He wrote a letter which you could call ‘an old letter for every age.’ James spoke to a people living in a time of uncertainty and ambiguity. He encouraged them to actively faithful faithfully active living. He championed and advocated how faith works. In September, our messages consider James.

In this first chapter, James teaches that God does not tempt us; we are tempted by our desires. Yet, God can use our experiences of trial, testing and temptation to mature us in active faith.

James teaches, “*be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*” (1:22). A few Sundays ago, I mentioned that references to mirrors in the first century were unlike our mirrors today. They used anything in which they could see an imperfect reflection. James warns us against being people who forget what we really look like. We need to pursue religion that is pure and undefiled before God.

Toward the end of chapter 1, James names the two components of Religious Work. One is this: to care for orphans and widows – the oppressed, suffering and distressed.

The other is this: to keep yourself unstained by the world.

We are to be actively faithful in serving the needs of those who cannot help themselves.

We are to be faithfully active in pursuing morality and virtue.

Both call us to invest in time alone with God, so we learn God’s characteristic of integrity.

Beloved, schizophrenic spirituality is a widespread disease today.

People confuse Christian faith with materialism, liberalism, conservatism and nationalism.

Private voices use the language of faith without any correlating actions of compassion.

Public voices wear a disguise of spiritual leadership while modeling immorality and injustice.

As followers of Jesus, when you look in the mirror, you should see the life of Jesus’ character being formed in you. Private faith and public Church should always express integrity, wholeness – a true reflection. Today’s Church must integrate personal commitment to God, so our service & ethics agree. As James puts it, “*Be ye doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*”

Your service and your exemplary ethical influence matter.

An eight-year-old boy taught this to a woman at the swimming pool this summer. He asked her if she loved God. She said, “*of course.*” He said, “*good, then would*

you please take care of my watch while I am in the water?" Your ethics and morals witness of your faith and God's Character.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught that discipleship is taking up Jesus' cross each day. You find your way to a new beginning by following Jesus and leaving behind whatever holds you back from obedience to God – your guilt, shame and commitments to lesser gods.

The life of Christian discipleship is to live as learners being transformed by God's Spirit.

We are not perfect; we are being perfected.

Isaac Babel was an exemplary Jewish writer of short stories. On one occasion, a friend visited Babel's study and noticed a tall stack of paper on the corner of his desk. He asked if Babel was finally writing a novel. Babel explained, 'No, those are just the most recent 22 drafts of my next story.' We are all being revised by God shaping and reshaping our faith.

In these days of anxiety and uncertainty, you may wonder what you should be doing.

As our nation observes Labor Day, let us renew ourselves to Religious Work.

Let us invest in time alone with God, opening our lives to the love of God at work in us.

Let us learn of God's integrity through Actively Faithful Faithfully Active Living.

Let us continue to care for those who suffer while living by God's ethics and morals.

Let us live in the ambiguity and uncertainty of these days by investing in our relationship with God and by relating God's love to one another and to others.

And, let us be like Billy, desiring that others experience the joy of being embraced by love.

Amen and AMEN!