

YouTube It!
James 1:12-27

You can learn how to do anything if you just watch a YouTube video. So,

Most of us remember learning to drive a car as an arduous/formidable process involving, most likely, practicing at a parking lot –weaving around church parking lots were great places during the week, usually with mom or dad – and of course working on parallel parking! Then there was the trip to the DMV to take a written or a verbal test and of course nervously navigating the road with a fully uniformed state policeman or, if you were lucky, a driving instructor that monitored your every move – possibly even taking notes. ‘Course many here remember the “fun” process of teaching our children to drive. Right? All of that practice and instruction if not on the first testing try was eventually 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?

Well, that’s what an 8-year-old boy in Ohio did one Sunday night a couple of years ago. You see, this young lad had a problem: his parents had fallen asleep early that evening, but the boy and his 4-year-old sister really felt the need for some McDonald’s fast food. However, 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 current generation 8 year old kid would do when confronted with a conundrum/a problem. He looked up “How to drive a car” on YouTube, emptied out his piggy bank, strapped his sister into her car seat, 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” (that’s the word they used) 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.

It would appear this young chauffeur had 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,

or the best way to tie your shoes, or how to make dinner – any recipe you may want, how to eliminate weeds in your lawn, best way to comb your beard - all you need to do is look it up on the world’s most popular video site and soon you to will be an expert - - even if it’s expertise on the best way to massage your pet chicken.

There are millions of these tutorial videos, most produced by just average people who have learned a skill and simply want to share it. It makes it possible for the most mechanically inept person to fix a faucet, or a maker of microwaved hotdogs to become a gourmet chef. Of course, all this instruction depends on you, the viewer’s, willingness to experiment and put the information into practice. Without that, it’s just another internet time-waster.

So, how do we stay faithful? Can we find an instructional video about living a good life?

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 sitting in a class taught by a scribe, or by receiving a letter from a distant instructor.

So, James wrote this letter to Jewish Christians who were caught up in the all social tensions of the mid-first century, where outbreaks of violence and insurrection were taking place in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas - 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 - (I’m so relieved that today we have overcome all these “social tensions”!).

The problem for the early church during this 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 his letter to encourage his brothers and sisters and to give them some instruction on how to navigate, how to operate, in difficult times. The letter reads

like a series of instructional videos, or a series of instructions on the Christian life – on faithfulness.

First instruction: (Verse 12). **Faithfulness must be practiced.**

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (v. 12). James saw the current situation not as just a time of testing for the Christian community, but also an opportunity to demonstrate faithfulness...Faithfulness must be practiced.

Second instruction: (Verses 13-17). **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, but rather it was a “gift” that God had given to his people - a chance to shine in the midst of a dark world as a community of the new creation that God had brought forth in the death and resurrection of Jesus (vv. 13-17)...Faithfulness will often be challenged or tested.

Third instruction: (Verses 17-18). **Faithfulness is rooted in the trustworthiness of God.**

In the Greco-Roman world, many people consulted astrology and the alignment of the stars as a kind of first-century YouTube to help determine their course of action (We three kings of orient are). James called the church to remember that they have been given the “perfect gift” of God: the “Father of the heavenly 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 change like shifting shadows” in God’s nature (v. 17). God and the word of God are the only reliable sources of information for the church, which God “chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (v. 18).

James sets this up as a direct contrast to the other kind of “birth” people have to sin; a birth conceived in desire, bringing forth sin which, in turn, gives birth to death (v. 15)(FYI: you can look up “How to give birth” on YouTube and find a whole bunch of videos). But for James, the only birth that really matters is the one that happens when we are born anew by God’s word of truth, which prepares us to be the “first fruits” of his new creation (v. 18)...Faithfulness is rooted in the trustworthiness of God.

Fourth instruction: (Verses 19-21). **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. While there are a ton of instructional videos on YouTube, there are plenty of folks who also use that platform to rant and spew hatred about a person, or a cause, or an issue. James would say, however, that this is like trying to deal with a problem without taking the time to first read the directions. James writes, “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” (vv. 19-20). James instructs his brothers and sisters to get rid of that kind of reactivity/reactiveness and to, instead, “humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you”. The same “word of truth” that gives new birth also guides the words and actions of the one whom God has saved...Faithfulness is grounded in the word.

Fifth instruction: **Faithfulness puts the word into demonstrable and visible action.** So how does that word of truth get activated in one’s life? (Verse 22-25).

James says that you have to practice it. – similar to the first instruction. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (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, that gives freedom,” and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - will be “blessed” in what he does. In fact, it’s the “doing” of the word that matters most for James (v. 25)... Faithfulness puts the word into demonstrable and visible action.

Sixth instruction: **Faithfulness is easier when we’re in fellowship with a community.** (Verses 26-27).

Some YouTube tutorials don’t quite convey the information in a way that’s easy to follow. Try tying a Windsor knot or 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 knot effectively you need someone standing beside you to show you how, guiding your fingers and helping you develop the internal memory of the process – those movements until it becomes second nature. It’s one thing to conceptualize the process, and quite another to execute it.

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’s religion that cares for the most vulnerable people (widows and orphans) and keeps oneself “from being polluted by the world” (v. 27).

It is religion, in other words, that uses the model of Jesus for both its belief and its practice. Just like tying that knot, 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, put it into practice, and then head out to an even greater destination. Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

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