

THE ACTIVE WORD

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on August 31, 2003.

Scripture: James 1:17-27

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Some people don't get paid unless you sell a car, or jewelry, or furniture, or newspapers or clothing. To someone who works on commission, there are few more discouraging words from a browsing customer than, when in response to a polite "May I help you?" one hears "No thanks, I'm just looking." "Just looking" -- What it means is "Go away, I have no intention of buying anything."

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." Sometimes we go "just looking" to sneak a peek at all those things that are beyond our reach. You go into a travel agency and look at the brochures on Bermuda, etc. Just looking. Did you ever pretend to be studying the photos of yachts for sale down at a marina? Or ever walk through the showroom of a Mercedes Benz Porsche dealership; checking out the latest models you won't be buying? Or maybe you prefer trying on a few diamonds and rubies; just to see how they look on your finger? "Sorry, just looking."

But some people spend all their lives "just looking". They have the money but they don't want to give up any of it to splurge on a trip to Bermuda or to buy a ring for their wife. They're never willing to invest their energies or emotions or economic security in anything because of the risks involved. They look the girls or guys over at the beach but are afraid don't introducing themselves. So many people are *permanently* "just looking". They drift in and out of *jobs* without ever finding real vocational satisfaction. They drift in and out of *relationships* without ever daring to love or make a commitment. They drift in and out of *communities* without ever casting a vote or going to a PTA meeting or volunteering. And they drift in and out of the *church*. They're just looking- maybe looking for Sunday morning entertainment but they resist opening their hearts to Christ or reaching out to become involved in the work of the church.¹

The text from James today reveals the author obviously felt a similar sense of frustration with would-be Christians who were just lookers. He was writing to people who were tempted to remain bystanders. It reminds me of a remark by the comedian Flip Wilson. Someone asked Flip Wilson what religion he was. Flip answered, "I'm a Jehovah's Bystander." "A Jehovah's Bystander?" remarked his friend. "I never heard of a

Jehovah's Bystander." Flip looked coy and said, "Well, they asked me to be a witness, but I didn't want to get involved." Just looking without getting involved – that's how a lot of people are. James reminds us that "Faithful Christians must be doing, not "just looking."

Sometimes Protestants don't like James. We emphasize God's grace, not works. God loves us unconditionally. He accepts us as we are. God always takes the initiative. Jesus said, "You did not choose me. I chose you." Salvation, blessing, acceptance with God is a free gift. And yet, gratitude makes it necessary for us to respond, to act, to be doers of the word and not just listeners. James makes a distinction between those who merely hear the word and those who do the word.

James isn't teaching salvation by works. He makes it plain that salvation is a free gift – not something we earn. He says in verse 17 that God is the source of all good gifts and he's a generous giver. One of God's most extravagant gifts is a new birth (verse 18). All of us who have children know that they didn't choose to be born. But every parent also knows how concerned we become if the newborn child doesn't act – doesn't breathe, doesn't cry. In the same way, God, our heavenly father, is concerned when his children – children to whom he gave a new birth – don't respond, don't act, don't get involved in his family. God wants us to be more than listeners or lookers. He wants us to be doers.

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. This reminds us of what Jesus said, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I tell you." The wise man built his house on a rock. Zacchaeus gave half of all his wealth away. Once a paralytic, someone who couldn't physically move, heard Jesus say, "Take up your bed and walk." The paralytic not only heard, he did what was impossible for him to do. He obeyed. The paralytic got up, took up his bed and walked. At the last judgment, Jesus said, the sheep and goats will be divided. Those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, will take their place with the sheep and enter the joy of the Lord. Those who called Jesus, "Lord", but didn't do anything are placed with the goats. Jesus also said, "By their fruits you shall know them." Meaning that it's not enough to talk the talk unless we walk the walk.

When we listen and don't act, we're like someone who looks in a mirror and says, "I need to shave," but doesn't shave. "I need a little lipstick", but doesn't apply it. "I need a haircut," but doesn't get one. "I have to

do something about the unusual mole on my back,” but doesn’t go to the dermatologist. “I am getting too fat,” but doesn’t change their lifestyle. But people who look into the mirror of God’s word and see what they have to do and then go and make those changes will be blessed.

The religious person is not the one who comes to church and says, “Just looking. I don’t intend to buy what you’re saying about Jesus and God and salvation and what the purpose of life is.” You may know the Bible forwards and backwards, but if you can’t bridle your tongue “you’re deceiving yourself about how religious they are.” Pure religion, James says, not only looks and listens but also acts. “Pure religion and undefiled cares for orphans and widows in their distress and doesn’t let the world’s values and priorities subvert them.”

Maybe I should just read the Scripture lesson again and say, “All right, I’m giving you homework this week. This week I want you to concentrate on doing three things. First, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Secondly, “rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.” Thirdly, “Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has power to save your souls.” That’s our homework. Go home and First - world’s values work on those three things: work on your listening skills. Don’t speak before your brain is engaged. See how well you can manage your anger. Be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

¹ Homiletics Online, “Just Looking”, Sunday, August 28, 1994