

Most of us remember learning to drive a car as a laborious process involving swerving around a parking lot with mom or dad, taking driver's ed classes, heading to the DMV, taking a written test, and nervously navigating the road with a driving examiner tracking our every move. All of that practice and instruction was 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?

That's what an 8-year-old boy in Ohio did one Sunday night. Apparently, the little young innovator had a problem: mom and dad had fallen asleep early, and the boy and his 4-year-old sister were jonesing for some McDonald's. 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 kid would do these days when confronted with a conundrum. He looked up "How to drive a car" on YouTube, emptied his piggy bank, then bundled his sister into the car 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" through town as though he had been driving for years — all because he watched a short video and then did precisely what it said to do. That pint-sized adventurer seemed to have grasped early on, what many of

us have figured out much later in life. That 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 attempting to make a repair on a home appliance or a car, how to put on makeup, or learning the intricate steps involved in cooking a gourmet meal, all you need to do is look it up on the world's most popular video site, and soon you'll be an expert yourself. Of course, no amount of instruction will be good enough unless the viewer is willing to experiment and put into practice the information they find. Without trying out what we discover, it's just another internet timewaster.

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 by receiving a letter from a distant instructor. That's exactly what we encounter in our second lesson this morning. The Apostle James had written a letter to Jewish Christians caught up in the social tensions of the mid-first century.

Apparently outbreaks of violence and insurrection, in and around Jerusalem, were not uncommon. Eventually those conflicts would culminate in a Jewish revolt around 70 CE. 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.

The problem before the church at that time of uncertainty can be summed up something like this: “How do we remain a faithful Christian community in the midst of trials and temptations?” James wrote to encourage his brothers and sisters, and to give them some instruction on how to navigate through difficult times. His letter reads like a series of random tutorial videos on the Christian life, but as witnessed in our second lesson for today, James made clear that no amount of instruction matters unless it is put into practice. James wanted the church to become experts not only in hearing the instruction, but doing the instruction as well.

“Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” James saw the current situation as a time of testing for the Christian community, but also an opportunity to demonstrate faithfulness. And as you may know from experience, our faithfulness is often challenged or tested. For James, being tested, or going through certain trails, was **not** something that God threw down in front of his people to break them, but rather it was a “gift” that

God gave to his people — a chance to shine in the midst of a dark world as a community of a new creation, that God had brought forth in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

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. James called the church to remember that they have been given the “perfect gift” of God: the “Father of 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 variation due to change” in God’s nature. God and the Word of God are the only reliable sources of information for the church, which God created “in fulfillment of his own purpose.” and birthed “by the word of truth.”

James sets this up as a direct contrast to the other kind of “birth” people have under sin; a birth conceived in desire, bringing forth sin which, in turn, can lead to death. But for James, the only birth that really matters is the one that happens when we are born anew by God’s word, which prepares us to be the “first fruits” of his new creation. And with that in mind, James then turns to the problem at hand, laying 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 use the site as a platform to rant and spew venom about some person, cause, or issue. James would say, however, that that is like trying to deal with a problem without taking the time to read the directions first. "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

James instructs his brothers and sisters to get rid of that kind of reactivity and to, instead, "welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save our souls!" Ok so this begs the question how does the Word of God get activated in one's life? James says that you have to practice it. "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." 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 put into practice what I've learned, then I will still be stuck with a constant drip. If I really want to fix the problem, I need to set 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 later," I'll quickly forget everything I've learned.

James says the same thing happens when we only hear the word of God, and fail to put it into practice. It's as though we have 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. And when we fail to take the word we have received, and put it into practice, building a kind of spiritual muscle memory, then we forget who God created us to be.

Finally, faithfulness is easier when we're in fellowship with a community. Some YouTube tutorials don't quite convey the information in a way that's easy to follow. Try tying 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 a bow tie effectively you need someone standing beside you to show you how, guiding your fingers and helping you develop the internal memory of the process 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. 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 God. It’s religion that cares for the most vulnerable people (widows and orphans) and it keeps oneself “unstained by the world.”

It is religion, in other words, that uses the model of Jesus for both its belief and its practice!

Like tying that bow tie, 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 the true nature of being an apostle of Christ you have to have someone live it out in front of you, someone to guide you along the way. Information alone isn’t enough; 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 embrace every opportunity we can...to be shining stars that reflect God’s glory. And 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 a set of car keys. All the motivation he needed was found in the prospect of a Happy Meal and a happy belly. Similarly, may we be motivated to take the instructions we have been given by God in Scripture, put them into practice, and then head out to an even greater destination with Jesus leading the way. Amen. Thanks be to God!