A 62 year old man decided to go back to college and get his Master’s Degree, just for the sheer satisfaction of doing it. While he was there he found himself partnered on a project with a young lady. As they worked together they got closer, and he found himself falling in love with her.

When he was visiting his doctor he said, “Do you mind if I ask you something? What do you think about my getting married to someone when there’s a forty year age difference?”

The doctor replied: “Well, not that it’s really my concern, but why on earth do you want to marry a woman who’s 102?”
A good sports coach doesn’t just talk theory about the game. That’s not why they’re paid so well.

A good coach speaks in a way that leads to action.

That is precisely the kind of talk we hear from James in this letter we just read a part of, a few minutes ago.

James knew that Theology, however good and true, is worthless, unless it is actually applied into people’s lives.

He wrote this letter not just to interest people intellectually. No, he wrote this letter because he wanted to speak about how we conduct ourselves and how we treat other people.

Who was St. James anyway, and why did he have the right to say anything?
Well, he was Jesus’ brother, his half brother to be exact, and at that time he was the head of the early Church in Jerusalem – pretty good credentials.

So, let’s take a fresh look at what he’s saying here. He reminds us that God knows our weaknesses and that God wants us to grow spiritually.

Most of us really want that too, especially at this time of our life when, sorry to say, we’re not growing any younger, any cuter, or any more athletic.

The thing he focuses on is the need to guard against speaking, or acting in anger.

Now, maybe that’s never a problem for anyone in here, but it’s just possible that you’re sitting near someone who occasionally has a problem with anger.
It’s even possible that they’re also sitting close to someone who occasionally has a problem with anger.

Anger is a pervasive force in our society. We see it everywhere. We see it nearly every time we go out in the car.

Men used to be the worst at it, but the last few years have seen the emergence of lots of angry young women behind the wheel, who run up too close to you, before they cut in front of you and wave at you, with just one finger.

We see it every day on the TV. The escalation of violence in the workplace, at schools, and in the streets is something we cannot be blind to.
A few years ago there was an incident at an airport where a flight was delayed and things got out of hand. After the scene was over and the dust had settled, an airline employee lost her job; a businessman went to jail; and an attorney lost his license to practice law. Uncontrolled anger has its costs.

Then listen to this grim statistic: More children under five die each year from injuries inflicted by a parent or guardian, than die from measles, polio, whooping cough, TB and rheumatic fever combined.

Anger is a pervasive force everywhere. We see it. We hear it. We encounter it in the form of rudeness, sarcasm and hostility.

But we also feel it welling up inside ourselves at times. All of us get angry on occasion, and usually inappropriately.
Sometimes we get into it with people we supposedly love the most.

We have available to us in our society, various healthy outlets for aggression, such as competitive sports. For some people this works well as a release of pent-up feelings.

But when you look at the frequent outbreaks of post-game violence in soccer or basketball, it clearly isn’t a healthy outlet for many people.

You may remember a report a few years back of two young fathers getting so angry over a little league game, and it ended up with one father killing the other, and with one going to prison.

How many people’s lives were ruined in that little moment of madness?
What we’re being told by James is to be slow to anger.

But controlling anger isn’t easy in the heat of the moment.

Psychologists tell us that we shouldn’t deny or suppress our anger, lest it builds up and comes out even worse later, or causes harm to our self.
There is certainly some truth in that.

But St. James isn’t advocating suppressing, or denying anger.
Neither does he recommend acting it out.

He doesn’t suggest that we should blame it on our parents, or our gene pool.
He doesn’t prescribe Valium or Librium to mask it.

He simply tells us to be slow to anger.
Because unchecked outbursts of anger are incompatible with the life that God wants us to lead.

By being slower to anger, we can take the time to be honest with ourselves. Am I getting angry because of a real injustice being inflicted?

Or, am I getting angry because I’m not getting my way, because what I want is being obstructed, or because my precious point of view has been assaulted?

Ill-considered outbursts of anger and the ways of God just don’t sit well together.
And, for every minute that you’re angry, you lose a minute of happiness.

Christianity is frequently misunderstood as teaching behavior control, with salvation as the reward.
But the truth is the other way round. A person who learns that they are redeemed by the grace of Christ is inwardly strengthened to exercise self-control.

It is the application of God’s Word that saves us from all selfishness and wrong doing.

So James urges us to hear the Word of the Lord. And not just hear it like background music in a grocery store, but to listen to it attentively.

Now everyone has a remarkable well-developed system of selective hearing and selective deafness.

All the mothers and grandmothers in here know that you can filter out all sorts of children’s noises, but when your child or grandchild is in real need, you will hear and respond immediately.
We all hear what we want to hear.

Some people have developed a remarkably sophisticated selective deafness when it comes to hearing sermons.

A Bishop I knew in England told me that back when he was a new priest he was giving his first sermon. He was not getting the feeling that people were paying attention, so halfway through, he asked, “Can everyone hear me all right?”

One man sitting in the middle of the church put up his hand and said, “I can hear you all right, but I’d be very happy to change places with someone who can’t hear you.”

James asks us to receive God’s Word. Listen and Receive.
And here comes the heart of the matter.
Living the Christian life means not just listening to God’s teaching but actually doing what it says.

Nearly two thousand years before Nike came up with their catchy little slogan, St. James was saying, “Just Do It.”

So what are we supposed to do?

James mentions three things – three things that if we don’t do we are deceiving ourselves and our religion is phony. These three things are controlling our tongues, personal purity, and taking care of the needy.

When you go to the doctor they often ask you to stick out your tongue so they can take a look at it.
I’m not quite sure why they want you to stick your tongue out, or exactly what the tongue can tell you about physical health.

But the tongue is also a clear indicator of our spiritual health.

What we do with our tongues spells out what’s going in our hearts and our minds. The tongue can be used to lift up, or to put down – to bring hope, or spread despair – to hurt, or to bless.

So, let’s finish by praying together a well known prayer that sums this up beautifully – the Prayer of St. Francis. (which you’ll find on p.833. of the Prayer Book).