

Functional Faith

Clay Cooney · James 1:2-4; James 1:12; James 1:22-24

AT A GLANCE

Clay Cooney uses his own shift from appearance-based gym training to 'functional fitness' to expose how most of us train our faith the same wrong way — for how we look, feel, or check a box — rather than for the trials we know are coming. Drawing on James 1, he argues that only a faith trained daily in small, unwitnessed moments of obedience produces the endurance that survives real hardship.

- Faith trained to look good or feel good collapses under real trials because it was never built for endurance in the first place.
- Endurance is formed in small, unwitnessed daily choices of integrity, not summoned suddenly in the moment a crisis hits.
- Hearing scripture without acting on it is like glancing in a mirror — you get information about yourself, but nothing actually changes.

“We need a faith that trains for the days that we can't see coming — not only the unknown but the unknowable.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[James 1:2-4](#) — My brothers and sisters, you will have many kinds of trouble. But this gives you a reason to be very happy. You know that when your faith is tested, you learn to be patient in suffering. If you let that patience work in you, the end result will be good. You will be mature and complete. You will be all that God wants you to be. (ERV)

[James 1:12](#) — Great blessings belong to those who are tempted and remain faithful! After they have proved their faith, God will give them the reward of eternal life. God promised this to all people who love him. (ERV)

[James 1:22-24](#) — Do what God's teaching says; don't just listen and do nothing. When you only sit and listen, you are fooling yourselves. Hearing God's teaching and doing nothing is like looking at your face in the mirror and doing nothing about what you saw. You go away and immediately forget how bad you looked. (ERV)

The argument

Training for the Wrong Metric — Appearance, emotional relief, and duty all ask the same self-referential question

Clay Cooney recalls years of gym training aimed only at looking good, feeling good, or checking a box — every version of it asking the same question, 'how am I doing?' He names the pattern plainly: 'the mirror is the metric.' He then applies it to faith directly — attending church, reading the Bible, or saying prayers for appearance, conscience relief, or discipline's sake, never asking whether any of it builds something able to hold weight. He cites a Barna finding that only about 10 percent of young Christian adults possess a truly resilient faith as evidence of what this kind of training produces: a faith that looks complete but was never built to endure.

Insight — Faith measured by how it makes you look or feel will always fail the test it was never designed to pass.

Trials Are a 'Whenever,' Not an 'If' — Praying trials away is magic, not the faith James describes

Opening James 1:2-4, Clay Cooney points to the word 'whenever' — 'whenever you encounter various trials' — as James assuming trials as a certainty, not a possibility to be negotiated. He contrasts this with what 'passes for Christianity today,' where people go through religious motions hoping to talk God into keeping hardship away, comparing it to pagan bargaining with the gods for good crops or victory in battle. 'That's not actually Christianity,' he says, 'that's a little bit more like magic.' James's aim isn't avoidance but survival: 'the goal is not to avoid the trials — the goal is actually just to endure the trials.'

Insight — A faith aimed at avoiding hardship is superstition; a faith aimed at enduring it is discipleship.

Maturity Is Forged in the Small Reps, Not the Big Moment — Preparation has to happen before the crisis, not during it

James says testing produces endurance 'so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing' — and Clay Cooney insists this maturity is built in 'little moments scattered throughout our lives,' where we choose integrity when no one is watching. He invokes Dallas Willard's critique of relying on a WWJD bracelet in the moment of temptation, quoting Willard's warning that it 'isn't an adequate discipline or preparation to live as he lived,' and that we could find ourselves 'driven to despair by the powerless tension it will put us through.' The people whose faith visibly holds under real tragedy, he says, are simply those who have been 'walking with Jesus every single day' long before the trial came.

Insight — Maturity is not summoned in a crisis; it is the accumulated residue of small, faithful choices made long before the crisis arrives.

The Mirror Reports; the Word Transforms — Hearing without doing leaves the reflection unchanged

Turning to James 1:22-24, Clay Cooney lands on what he calls the letter's thesis: 'be doers of the word and not hearers only.' He walks through James's image of a man who glances in a mirror and 'at once forgets what he looks like' — a mirror only reports information, it 'can't build anything.' Against this he sets 'the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres,' someone who lets what they read actually reorganize how they treat people, speak, and respond in anger — and 'he will be blessed in his doing.'

Insight — Scripture only observed and not obeyed changes nothing; it must be practiced into daily relationships to build anything durable.

DEVOTIONAL

There is a kind of training that only asks the mirror what it wants to hear — do I look right, do I feel settled, have I done enough today to call it faith. It is not dishonest, exactly; it is simply aimed at the wrong horizon. It trains for the room it is standing in, not for the storm it cannot yet see. But somewhere down the road a trial is waiting that was never advertised in advance — a diagnosis, a betrayal, a question with no easy answer — and it will not ask how you look. It will ask what you are actually made of. It will test the architecture, not the appearance. James does not promise the trial will be avoided. He promises something stranger: that the trial itself, endured, is the very thing that finishes the building. Not the bracelet reached for in the panic of the moment, but the thousand small reps taken when no one was measuring — the honest word spoken, the patience chosen, the quiet obedience nobody applauded. Those are the sets and reps of a faith being made whole. So the question worth sitting with is not how am I doing, but what am I becoming ready for. Not what does the mirror say today, but what will the weight of tomorrow find when it presses down. Grace does not ask you to earn your endurance; it invites you to be trained by it, day after ordinary day, until the unknowable finds you already standing.

Reflection

- Where in your spiritual life have you been training for appearance or feeling rather than for endurance — and how would you know the difference?
- Think of someone whose faith visibly held under real loss. What daily, unremarkable habits do you imagine were quietly forming them long before that loss came?
- What is one small, unwitnessed moment this week — a word, a reaction, a temptation — where you could practice integrity as training rather than performance?

Closing prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for this day and for these people who came to worship and to learn to relate to you — there is good in that, and we are meant to do it. But Lord, let this message be more than a Sunday moment. Let it shape how we treat people, how we respond when we're frustrated, and the small integrity we choose when no one is watching — all of it training for the days ahead. Help us not merely look in the mirror at our own appearance, but train for real endurance. Give us a functional faith. In Jesus' name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Endurance isn't summoned in a crisis — it's built beforehand, in the small, unwitnessed choices of every ordinary day.

This week

This week, pick one small moment where no one would notice if you cut a corner — a hard conversation, an honest word, an unseen kindness — and choose integrity there. Before you do, read James 1:22-24 and ask God in prayer to make you a doer, not just a hearer.

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