

REAL FAITH / REAL LIFE SERIES

FRUIT OF FAITH

JAMES 3:9-18 | JUNE 27, 2021

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A few summers ago now, when I was working as a summer pastor at Knox Presbyterian Church in Bayfield, we hosted Kintail on the Road one day a week, all summer long. KOTR is like a vacation bible school that counsellors from Camp Kintail come and lead for nearby churches. At the end of the afternoon, to wind the kids down as we waited for their parents to come, there was a sing-along time. One of the favourites was the song, “Fruit of the Spirit.” The great fun of it was shouting out different kinds of fruit: apples, oranges, bananas, pineapples...but the song always began like this:

*the Fruit of the Spirit's not a coconut,
the Fruit of the Spirit's not a coconut,
if you want to be a coconut, you might as well hear it:
you can't be a fruit of the Spirit.*

And then the chorus of the song is to list off the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians:

*Love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
gentleness and self-control.*

The reason I am telling you about this kid’s Bible camp song is because it perfectly sums up the point that James was trying to make in this Sunday’s Scripture reading.

James’ letter is all about the shape of our faith and the shape of our lives. James comes at faith from a different angle than a lot of the rest of the New Testament, placing the emphasis on the practical outcome in our lives of having faith in Jesus. These past two Sundays we’ve been reflecting on the shape of our faith; this week, we’re shifting our focus to the shape of our lives. We know that our faith in Jesus – if it’s genuine and real – must be what guides our thoughts, our actions, our decisions, and our words. Now James is saying that our lives must consistently show that influence.

We jumped in to James 3 at the end of a discussion about the damage unconsidered or harsh speech can do within the church. At the beginning of chapter 3, James acknowledges that we all stumble to some extent, and then makes the point that small things can have a big impact, like a bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a great ship. And then he flips it around, writing about how small things – like unkind, angry words – can likewise have a disproportionately large and damaging impact within a Christian community.

The key is to be consistent, and this is where we started reading today: we cannot bless God, sing his praises, pray, in one breath and then say damaging, hurtful things to another person in the next, another person who is, as we are, made in God's image and loved and valued by God.

Our lives cannot be one shape when we speak and think of God, and another shape entirely when we speak and act and think about one another, and about our neighbours in the world. It is not possible – it would be as ridiculous as a spring that alternated between freshwater and saltwater, as a fig tree producing a harvest of olives or a grapevine yielding figs. To bless God and then curse another person – it makes no sense. If God has nurtured faith in us, if that faith in Jesus is what's at work in us, then this kind of inconsistent behaviour should be impossible. And not because we know better, but because we are better, because our being, the person we are, has been changed by faith, our outlook on life transformed by faith and the indwelling presence of God's Spirit.

For James, the clearest sign of the Spirit's indwelling presence, and the best confirmation of God's grace and our faith at work within us, is wisdom.

At the very beginning of his letter, James names wisdom as God's particular good and perfect gift to us: "If any of you lacks wisdom, [he wrote] you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." And it's this idea he picks up again in our text today: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."

James describes two lives, one shaped by "false" wisdom, as he calls it, and the other shaped by true wisdom, the kind that God gives. The practical consequences of false wisdom can be seen in selfish ambition, envy and boastfulness. It is a life that is self-centered, inward-looking and self-absorbed.

James uses dramatic language here, describing a life shaped by false wisdom as “earthly, unspiritual, devilish,” a descending scale of awful behaviour from bad to terrible to worse.

What might a person who lives like this have faith in? We can speculate that it must be their own desires for personal power or wealth, their belief in their own importance and value as far greater than that of any neighbour. But whatever it is such a person might have faith in, it certainly isn't Jesus.

True wisdom, that comes from above as God's gift is, on the other hand, shapes one's life in the qualities of peacefulness, gentleness, a willingness to listen openly and thoughtfully to another, full of mercy and other good fruits, without any of the favouritism James wrote against in last week's text or the hypocrisy with which we began today.

It should not surprise us that these qualities echo the ways that Jesus taught us to be in the Sermon on the Mount, because they are marks of rightness in human relationships and in our relationship with God, and that is very much what Jesus sought to teach. It should also not surprise us that these qualities sound very much like those qualities that Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, identifies as the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...not a coconut or a banana or a misplaced fig among them.

This is the shape of a life when it is shaped by faith in Jesus.

We are going to digress for a moment, and consider the middle ground, something James does not do, but which, I think today, we must. James looks at the extremes: a life shaped by selfishness and self-absorption vs. a life shaped by faith in Jesus. The middle ground is a person who gives to charity, who volunteers in the community, who is nice to people, who believes strongly in good things, like social assistance, accessible healthcare, and a just and fair legal system.

A good citizen.

But not a person who professes any faith in Jesus.

So how do we as Christians make sense of the person who lives in this middle ground, shaped by faith – not in Jesus, and not in their own self-importance – but in the value of doing good for the community and for others?

To answer that question today we have to go back, two thousand years ago, with an example that is all-to relevant today. In the first few centuries of this era, when a serious sickness or plague would strike a town or city, those with money or means would run for the hills. The Christians would stay and nurse the sick, sometimes even succumbing themselves. People were astonished. Nobody had ever done this kind of thing before, not en masse as a community, for others. Caring for the vulnerable, and for the sick, helping the poor by giving alms or donations...no one quite knew what to make of these Christians. The fascinating thing is that, over the centuries, much of the world took up the hint. Historian Tom Holland, in his recent book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, writes that much of what we take for granted in social attitudes and ethical behaviour now were Christian innovations then. The other ancient foundational world civilisations didn't do it like that.

But the Christians disagreed. The shape of Christian life was influenced first by God and his people, who understood themselves as family descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, led by a God who had always had a special concern for the poor, the sick, the outcast, the vulnerable. The early followers of Jesus extended that family life marked by justice and care to include an ever-growing and diverse family of believers and neighbours, spreading across cities and countries and continents. Our modern world in some places has held onto bits of it, like accessible healthcare, an impulse to care for the vulnerable, free education for children, and social assistance, while letting the religious part increasingly fall away. Being Christian does not make everything one does good; more than any others, we Christians know all about sin and failure, and how easy it is to stumble into both. But from the perspective of a 21st century Christian, these modern morals and ethics must be seen as the fruit of a very distinctive faith, one that shapes lives of generosity, of peace, of self-giving love.

And that brings us back to James' letter, and the wonderful last verse we read today, how the shape of our lives, shaped by our faith, leads to a harvest of righteousness, sown in peace for those who make peace. Righteousness is one of those biblical words with layers of meaning, but the one that matters most here is, I think, righteousness as right and just relationship with God, with creation, and with one another, relationships lived with true wisdom by those whose lives have been shaped by faith in Jesus. And that follows nicely into peace, because of course we know that peace in the Bible is not a quiet and calm afternoon or the absence of conflict, but shalom, which means wholeness, completeness, abundance and fulfilment in Christ, forever.

The shape of our lives, as faithful followers of Jesus, leads us here: to a harvest of right relationship with God and each other, sown and reaped in peace, in wholeness and abundant fulfilment in Christ.

It is, for all of us, an intimidating and worrying task, to look once more into James' mirror, to lay out our own lives for inspection against what he described as a life shaped by genuine faith in Jesus. It should not surprise us that the qualities of James' true wisdom, Paul's fruit of the Spirit, Jesus' own sermon on the mount – it should not surprise us when we find that we are not quite there yet. When James wrote, at the beginning of his letter, about asking God for wisdom, he followed it up by reminding us to ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

So ask, and don't doubt in God or in the transforming power of faith in God at work in you.

A favourite author of mine, writing well over a hundred years ago now, addressed the kind of anxiety or frustration that comes from being in the middle of one's faith journey. I expect I've shared this with you before, because I find it very encouraging myself.

She wrote,

“the lump of clay from the moment it comes under the transforming hand of the potter, is, during each day and each hour of the process, just what the potter wants it to be at that hour or on that day, and therefore it pleases him. But it is very far from being matured into the vessel he intends in the future to make it...[likewise] the apple in June is a perfect apple for June. It is the best apple that June can produce. But it is very different from the apple in October.....God's works are perfect in every stage of their growth.”

There is a lot of freedom and confidence in the idea that a green, unripe, completely inedible June apple is perfectly imperfect in its season, that we, in our not-quite-there yet faith-shaped lives, are likewise perfectly imperfect.

There is also a lot of hope in the certainty and the promise from God that if we continue to grow in our faith, our lives will firm up and hold the shape of that faith in every situation, that we'll continue to reveal the ripe autumn fruit of God's gifts to us, and we will continue to mature and be transformed by our faith in him. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Books referred to in this sermon:

Holland, Tom. *Dominion: how the Christian revolution remade the world*. Basic Books, New York, 2019.

Whitall-Smith, Hannah. *The Christian's secret of a happy life*. Willard Tract Repository, Boston, 1875.