

A FAITH THAT WORKS: The Good Life

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-faith-that-works-the-good-life/

I.

One of our family's favorite stories comes from my niece's first day of kindergarten. My mom picked up Morgan and her older brother, Blake, from school as she did every day until they could drive. They enjoyed catching up on the short ride home, where snacks, games, and Grandpa awaited them until mommy and daddy got home from work.

Since school and school lunches were new to Morgan and she was a picky eater, we were concerned about how she'd do at lunch that first day. On the car ride home, Grandma asked her what she had for lunch. Morgan said, "Banana." Grandma said, "Didn't you have something else besides banana?" She said, "Ketchup." Blake piped in, "You had Ketchup with your banana?" "No," Morgan said, "with my chicken tenders, but I didn't like them." Morgan loved chicken tenders, so Grandma asked, "Why didn't you like your chicken tenders, Morgan?" She replied, "Because after I peeled everything off, there was just a hot dog."

Thus, Morgan was introduced to the fine cuisine known as the corn dog.

My mom and dad always taught us, including the grandkids, that what's on the inside matters more than what's on the outside. Kindergarten Morgan could not agree more.

Neither could James, the writer of this letter in the New Testament.

II.

"What's on the inside matters more than what's on the outside." While we often hear it about superficial things like appearance, wealth, or status, this truth holds even more weight when we look at our spiritual lives. James begins our passage today by asking, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" Perhaps everyone's hand shot up when they heard the question. Me. I'm a pretty good person. I may not be the sharpest crayon in the box, but I'm sharper than so-and-so.

But James isn't talking about head knowledge but rather wisdom from above. The kind of wisdom that comes from an active, vital, engaging faith, a faith that submits to God and proves itself in good deeds and stands in contrast to the world. Wisdom from above is pure, peace-loving, considerate, willing to yield, full of mercy, produces good fruit, impartial, and sincere. Who is wise and understanding among us in this way?

James says this kind of holy, God-honoring behavior comes only from a right relationship with God. As we grow closer to God, God's Spirit grows deeper in us and reflects out into the world. Be close to God, and God's wisdom will flow through our actions.

Author Bob Goff used to hang piñatas from their family's favorite tree in the backyard as often as possible. Sometimes they did it for their birthdays, but sometimes they did it because it was Saturday, and what better day for a piñata than Saturday? Bob would sneak off to the store to get a dinosaur or unicorn or rainbow-colored zebra, fill it full of candy, and two hours later, the family would be scrambling through the grass in search of Starbursts.

Bob reflected that the more opportunities he had to blow it as an adult, the more other peoples' responses reminded him we're a lot like those piñatas. When people erupt into fits of rage when they're wronged or surprise us with tenderness when we know they've been hurt, we get to see what's inside of them. We see what they're made of whenever they break.

Hopefully, it's not with a baseball bat, but at some point in life, something will break you. We can't avoid it because we're all a little broken, and we're bound to get things wrong. Someone will eventually nestle their way into your heart and then let you down. And when they do, you'll either explode in anger, refuse to open up, or to pour out love. Be love, so love will flow out when people fail you, just like it flowed from Jesus when people failed him.

Give away love like you're made of it, Bob says. Let God's love fill you up like candy in a piñata, so when you take a hit, it's what will pour out of you.¹

III.

James says there is something like a civil war inside each of us. We are walking contradictions. We crave being loved but find it difficult to love or fear we can't really be loved. We need to assert our independence, but we crave being in community. We are made for intimacy but hate getting hurt. We want to live for God, but we also want to live for ourselves. We are a bundle of paradoxes. When we get hit, it's hard to know sometimes just what will come out.

Much of the conflict in our lives comes not from external circumstances but from the desires within us and the chaos they bring. Bitterness is the first identified culprit. This includes bitterness against others, circumstances, ourselves, and God. Next comes jealousy (vv. 14-16), arrogance (v. 14), and self-deception or lying against the truth (v. 14). Encouraging the root of bitterness to grow is the fertilizer of unforgiveness, which grows conflict and brokenness in relationships with God and others. Bitter, prideful, negative emotions yield the fruits of disorder and, as James calls it, "every evil thing."

But when our hearts are aligned with God's heart, when we submit and consistently draw near to God, our actions, words, relationships, and how we show up in the world will grow like wisdom from above. James says that wisdom will be "... first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (v. 17) This wisdom will pour out of us, even when we take a hit.

Friends, I fear that when people encounter many Christians today, their experience is a bit like Morgan's chicken tender disappointment on that first day of kindergarten. Many have heard of

Jesus and his message of grace, mercy, and love. They have heard of the way he treated people on the margins of life with compassion and understanding – the poor, the outcast, sexual minorities, immigrants and foreigners, women and children – and they are expecting the same taste from their encounters with his followers. But, instead of the chicken they were expecting, they got a hot dog. When all the talk about love, mercy, and grace is pulled off, they find judgment, partiality, and hypocrisy at the core. When things don't go our way or the empire doesn't bend a knee to our beliefs or wishes, they find us anything but peaceable, gentle, and willing to yield or listen for understanding.

It leaves a horrible taste when people are expecting good fruits from the followers of Jesus but get sour grapes. It leaves an awful aftertaste in our lives when we let the seeds of jealousy, ambition, and disorder take root in us, growing disorder and chaos in our relationships with God and others.

IV.

James speaks a lot about seeds. As far as we know, James wasn't a farmer. But he knew the power of a seed, how something so tiny, when watered and planted in rich soil, can push up through the dirt and bear fruit. Never underestimate the power of a seed. The first chapter of James says that the very word of God has been planted inside you. Think about that. Buried inside each of us is a seed planted there by God the farmer.

James says to tend to that seed. Give it enough water, light, and fertilizer. Stay near to God, like trees planted by streams of water and get ready to see what God grows in and through you.

Verse 18 reads, "Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts." The principle for peace is the same as for crops: Never underestimate the power of a seed of justice and a good, peaceful act, no matter how small it seems.

Author and Pastor Max Lucado told a story of a visit to his doctor after seventeen years. Since he was way overdue, he ordered the works. One nurse put him on a table and stuck little cold suction cups to his chest. Another nurse wrapped a heavy band around his arm and squeezed a black bulb until his arm tingled. Then they pricked his finger (which always hurts) and told him to fill up a cup (which is always awkward). Then, with all the preliminaries done, they put him in a room and told him to take off his shirt and wait for the doctor.

Max joked that something about being poked, pushed, measured, and drained makes you feel like a head of lettuce in the produce department. He sat on a tiny stool and stared at the wall.

Max reminds us that somebody in our world feels like he felt in that office. The daily push and shove of the world has a way of leaving us worked over and worn out. Someone in our gallery of people is sitting on a cold aluminum stool of insecurity, clutching the backside of a hospital gown for fear of exposing what little pride they have left. And that person desperately needs a word of peace.

Someone needs you to do for them what Dr. Jim did next for Max.

Jim is a small-town doctor in a big city. He remembers names and keeps pictures of babies he delivered on his office bulletin board. And though you know he's busy, he makes you feel you are his only patient.

After a small talk and a few questions about Max's medical history, he put down the file and said, "Let me take off my doctor hat for a minute and talk to you as a friend."

The chat lasted about five minutes. Dr. Jim asked about Max's family, workload, and stress. He told Max he thought he was doing well at the church and loved reading his books.

Nothing profound, nothing probing. He went no deeper than Max allowed. But Max felt he would have gone to the bottom of the pit with him if he had needed him to.

After those few minutes, Dr. Jim stared down his throat, looked in his ear, and listened to his chest. When he was all done, Dr. Jim took his doctor hat off again and reminded Max not to carry the world on his shoulders. "And be sure to love your wife and hug those kids because when it all boils down to it, you're not much without them."

"Thanks, Jim," Max replied. And then Jim walked out as quickly as he'd come in—a Seed Sower in a physician's smock.ⁱⁱ

V.

At the heart of this New Testament letter is the desire to use our faith to impact the world. The word of God has been planted in you. Now go and do something with it. For James, how we speak with our co-workers is seed sowing. How we treat our opponents on the soccer field is seed sowing. How we help around the house is seed sowing. Seed sowing is how we treat and tip the server after services today. How we refuse to value one person more than another is seed sowing. How we show a willingness to yield or listen for understanding to someone who lives, looks, loves, or votes differently from us is seed sowing. Never underestimate the power of a seed.

A professor once worked with a congregation, trying to help them see God not as a distant judge watching everything they do but as a co-pilot in this life—one who comes alongside us and uses us to bring about a better world. So, this professor asked the group what they and God were doing on Monday at 9:00 a.m.

One man raised his hand and said, "Well, I am balancing the books for the business I work at. But I do not have a clue what God is doing." The professor asked him, "What type of business do you work for?" The man said, "A grain mill." "And where does your grain go?" "To bread companies." "And where does their bread go?" "Mostly southern Chicago." The professor paused and thought for a moment. "So, if you don't balance the books correctly, you might end up selling grain at too high a price. Which means the bread makers would need to raise the cost of their bread. Which means the stores on the South side of Chicago would have to increase the

price of the bread. Which means the bread might become too expensive for the single mother with two children who needs it. But if you do your job well, the cost of bread will be accurate and more affordable." The professor concluded, "It sounds like to me, on Monday at 9:00 a.m., you and God are feeding families on the South side of Chicago."ⁱⁱⁱ

Wherever you are tomorrow at 9:00 a.m., there is an invitation for you and God to work side by side, sowing seeds of peace for the glory of God and the good of the world. This is a faith that works, a faith that showers wisdom from above when it takes a hit. It shows up in the ordinary of our day and makes it sacred. It shows up in the ordinary of our relationships and makes them holy. It takes a tiny seed sown in peace and builds a kingdom. Never underestimate the power of a seed. And for goodness' sake, never disappoint someone with a hot dog when they are expecting chicken.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ [Bob Goff, *Live in Grace, Walk in Love: A 365 Day Journey*, Thomas Nelson, 2019, p. 45.](#)

ⁱⁱ Max Lucado. *The Applause of Heaven*.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2012/10/15/sunday-september-23rd-sermon-on-james-313-48/>