

This Is Us: Living Our Faith – Do Good

James 3:13-18

September 24, 2023

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Let me tell you a story... in the winter of 2010, Barb had just retired and was looking for some meaningful way to spend her time. A speaker at her local church connected her with BroadStreet Ministry, which serves the homeless population in Philadelphia.

Barb wasn't a good cook, but she could sew well. So, she offered to start a mending program, and she quickly and easily recruited friends to help. She said, "Every woman I asked said yes. I didn't have to beat the bushes, I thought that was God's hand. I had the idea, but I think God was guiding all of us"

Others supported them too, donating sewing supplies, including nice and new sewing machines. Overtime the group grew to 30 menders. They gather on Thursday mornings, and by the afternoon, their guests have mended clothing.

Reflecting, Barb said, "Homeless people have to wait for everything, they aren't used to being served. In the beginning, if they had pants we shortened, I'd press them and put them over my arm like a valet to return them. They'd look at me like, 'what? They are pressed and you're bringing them out on your arm?'"

For people used to be treated as if they're invisible, this mending ministry is a big deal. And it wasn't only clothes mended, but hearts.

I stumbled upon this story in a book by Brad Aronson called "HumanKind: Changing the World one small act at a time."¹



This whole book is a mood -booster, filled with stories of people who did something good, that made a difference. I'll be sharing a few stories from this book, but highly recommend you add this to your "to be read" pile and be inspired by the stories of good within these pages.

This morning, we're in our third week of our sermon series called This is Us: Living our Faith. And we're spending time with John Wesley's Three General Rules, receiving their wisdom about what it means to be a follow of Christ.

Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that our salvation is not just personal, it's not about some golden ticket, but salvation is transformational for you and for the world. Because Christ desires that all of us are made whole and know God's healing grace.

Wesley created these three general rules to help us live out our faith *and* live in community with others. As a refresher, they are, and say them with me:

Do no harm

Do good.

Attend to the ordinances of God.

The last one we sometimes summarize as "staying in love with God". Last week, Pastor Tami helped us understand the first rule, to do no harm, by helping us learn the power of our words and actions. Today, we'll dig into the second: Do Good.

Two simple words, but they invite us into a lifetime of following Christ with intention, loving God and our neighbor through our actions. Wesley gave us a framework for understanding this *good*, by inviting us to do good by:

Caring for people's bodies

Caring for people's livelihoods

Caring for people's hearts

Running with patience, relying on God's wisdom

Caring for people's bodies, by giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. By caring for their livelihoods, by helping one another in their homes or business, by employing others fairly. By caring for people's hearts by being encouraging in your words, and seeking any opportunity to show your love by doing good. And by running with patience the race before us, daily relying on God's wisdom for guidance.

Two simple words: do good. But they cover our whole human experience. And at its core, it requires that we see one another first, as God's beloveds. And second, to treat everyone we meet as such, seeing the image and face of Christ in one another.

For Barb, whose experience of mending clothing I shared earlier, this meant seeing those experiencing homelessness as the full people of God they are. It meant withholding judgement or fear, and acting instead only out of love. Caring for them, in the same way, that she had cared for her own family over many years of mending and tending to their clothing and hearts.

She gave the gift of mended pants, patched jackets, and repaired shirts. But more than that, she gave the gift of love and belonging, in her simple act of doing good.

Another story. Melody's son had a strict "no hats" rule and required that every student left their hats at home or in their bags and lockers. But when one student, a little girl with cancer, lost her hair during chemo, the students rallied around her. A group of fifth graders made a deal with their principal: any

student can wear a hat, so long as they donated \$1 toward cancer research. Together, their school raised \$500 and supported their classmate in immeasurable ways.

One of the things I love about these General Rules, is that they are inclusive to everyone. It doesn't matter your age or experience, all of us have the ability to follow them. We can all *do good*, in our own way, in our own place, using the gifts of God's wisdom already given us.

This morning, four of our youth will be confirmed. They have spent the last year studying, learning, and growing in their faith. And today, they made the decision to affirm the promises made at their baptism. On that day, their parents and church family, made promises on their behalf, to help them grow in love of God and know God's grace in their lives.

And *oh goodness*, before these four youth even had the ability to form and shape words, God was active in their lives. God showed up for them, in their homes and schools, here in worship and confirmation. At Storm camp, and everywhere else they found themselves. They saw God present in their life, and today are saying "YES" to God's invitation to follow.

Soon, these youth will be asked to affirm the promises made at their baptisms. I invite you, as a church, to prayerfully affirm these promises for yourself today, too. God's loving grace is present in our lives, without our asking or deserving. It is a free gift from God for you.

But these vows are one way, that we commit to living together as the body of Christ. And, I think, they help shape the ways we "do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God."

Our baptismal promises, which we affirm at confirmation or *anytime* we remember our baptism are these:

- Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of your sin?
- Do you accept the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression?
- Do you confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put your whole trust in Christ's grace?
- Will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?
- And will you strengthen the ministry of the church and faithfully participate through your prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness?

Together, the waters of baptism invite us to be transformed in such a way that our words and actions *do no harm* by rejecting evil, injustice and oppression, while aligning our words and actions with God in ways that *do good*, by representing Christ in the world through our presence, gifts, service, and witness.

As Pastor Tami mentioned a couple weeks ago, one of our intentions through this series is to help us take our "faith out of a box" and see that it isn't something we do only here in church, or only when we are serving together as a congregation.

Rather, in the waters of baptism and grace of God already present in your life, you are ambassadors to Christ with your whole self, wherever you are, no matter *who* you are, or what stage or position you're at in life.

Another story. When Larry was a young adult, he experienced poverty. He was living paycheck to paycheck, had no family support, and ended up without a home to live in when the business he worked for closed. He began to live in his car, using his clothing as cover to stay warm. One day, he was so desperate for a warm meal, he went to the Dixie Diner. He ordered breakfast, without knowing how he would pay.

When the check came, he began looking around the floor, pretending he'd lost his wallet. The cook came out to help him, and suddenly: the search was over. "Here," the cook said, "you must have dropped this." And he handed Larry a \$20 dollar bill.

Larry knew it wasn't his, of course, but a gift of goodness from the cook. So moved by his generosity, he vowed to make a difference as soon as he was able. To pass on that act of kindness to others.

Overtime, Larry kept that vow. He became known as a "Secret Santa" for all the money he gave away. He worked with local officials to find families who needed support, and others he met himself at diners or laundromats. Sometimes he gave people \$20 to pay for a meal, other times he gifted \$100 to buy a birthday gift. All told, Larry gave away more than \$1.4 million dollars over the years.

But then, after playing Santa for twenty years, Larry was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He spoke with a local reporter and told his story, hoping his story would raise up new Secret Santas. It did, and this Secret Santa initiative spread around the world. One of the Santa's said,

"The compassion shared from one random act of kindness is priceless. It is an instant connection between souls that change a life forever... It's not about the person or the money, it's about the message. Anyone can be a Secret Santa with a kind word, a gesture, a helping hand."

This attitude of doing good, sounds like the words we read from James today. *"Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom."* Doing good, is a posture of your heart that begins with love, and followed by mercy and grace. God is the giver of this wisdom, and from God we have experienced first the gift of "doing good".

We see it in our own lives, in how God is present to us: hearing the prayers of our hearts. Forgiving us, even when we mess up over and over again. The ways that God walks with us, even when we don't know where we're going, and gently nudges us forward. We see it in the ways that God's grace is all around us — God loves us so deeply, and it's not because we deserve it, or do all the right things, or know the right words. It's not because we proven ourselves in some way. God loves you, because you are God's precious child.

Doing good, then, is not about us *earning* God's love or grace. It is not about our earning God's redemption and salvation. Instead, we do good, *because* we are so moved and inspired by the gifts of God in our lives, that we desire to share that with others.

James tells us we can discern the wisdom from God in our lives in this way:

First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.

When you are discerning the right action or decision, if you're trying to figure out if that thought in your head is from God, begin here: Is it peaceful and gentle? Is it filled with mercy and good actions? Is it fair and genuine? If yes, it is of God. And if your actions and thoughts align with this, then you will be a person you sows seeds of justice and peace into the world.

This week, I was with our high school youth group. They too, are talking about the “soundtracks” in our lives, and learning how to discern the presence of God. They were taught to ask this, of their words, thoughts and actions: *Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it kind?*

Are the thoughts in your minds, the actions of your day, the words of your mouth true, helpful and kind? If so, keeping going: these are of God. And if not, take a pause. Breathe. Reflect on the presence of God in your life: what is the thing that is true, helpful and kind? Redirect your thoughts and actions to this place.

Doing good, in the name of Christ, means that our motivation is found, not for our own good, but for love of God and neighbor. And so, dear friends, maybe we all take a page from our high schoolers and ask: is it true? Is it helpful? Is it kind?

Living out our faith by doing good doesn't have to happen on an enormous scale. It might be wearing hats in solidarity to a friend. It might be offering a smile to a Mom who is trying to get a screaming toddler out of Target. It might be sending a card or an email to a friend. I've been sharing stories of people *doing good* today, to help us notice the ways that even small actions and moments can make a big impact. You can make a big impact, right now, wherever you are.

But you know what? It turns out doing good is *good* for you, too. Studies have shown that doing good leads to happier and healthier mental and physical health, and improves relationships. MRIs show that doing good by your words, actions, and generosity activates the same parts of your brain that is stimulated by a really good meal, a hearty laugh, or even being in love.

Of course doing good is not the *only* way we nurture health in our lives, but it is a reminder that when we live into the invitation from God to love God and our neighbor, we will find blessings. It doesn't mean that all of life will be easy, because sometimes it is *really* hard and we find ourselves *up to here*, not knowing how we will manage or make our way through.

But by God's grace, found in the loving words and actions of those around us. Found also in *our* loving words and actions, Christ will be at work in and through us.

One last story... Brad, the author of the book telling many of the stories I've shared with you today, told his own experience with kindness, too. His wife was admitted to the hospital for inpatient chemotherapy, where she would stay for a month. Once she was settled in, Brad raced home to pack everything she'd need for that time. When he got back to the hospital, his parking spot was a long walk, and so like many of us who want to avoid several trips, he loaded himself up like a pack animal with the suitcase, shoulder bags, pillows, and everything else.

Along the way, Brad kept dropping things, and no matter how he adjusted, he just couldn't carry it all with ease. But he'd come too far already, and was committed. Increasing his frustration was watching all the people pass by him without a second look or assistance. Just when he was reaching his limit, and beginning to settle in the pain and grief of it all, he heard these beautiful words: *“You look like you need a hand. Can I help?”*

It was a young guy, a med student in residency, who helped Brad carry the load all the way to his wife's room. The student was maybe late for rounds, or sacrificed his lunch break. Brad didn't even know his name, but he remembered years later his kindness.

Reflecting on this, Brad wrote,

“Life is a series of single days. If we make up our minds to help each other through those days, before we know it we'll be getting by. Of the many forms that love takes, maybe the most obvious one

is a simple decision: a decision to put in the effort to make someone's life easier or more rewarding, even if just for a day. A commitment to doing more than hoping for the best for each other. It's bringing a homeless person a meal. It's being a positive influence for someone who needs one. It's helping in the wake of a disaster. It's taking some of the load of a guy whose legs are starting to buckle under the weight." (p.25)

Life is a series of single days. Friends, how will you spend yours? Winston Churchill said: "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give." How are you shaping your life by the good that you do, and the way that you give to others in love? How might your school, your workplace, our community and world be transformed, by the ways that you embody the promises of Christ and the invitation to love one another through our words and actions?

I've shared several stories with you today, and I hope that they inspired you. But more than that, I hope that they have encouraged you to say YES to God's invitation to love and do good.

Let us pray:

Good and gracious God, we thank you for your faithful presence in our lives and continual invitation to follow you and embody your love to our world. Fill us with your wisdom today, that our words and actions be ones that do no harm, do good, and stay in love with you. Open us to opportunities to speak and act in kind ways, that you might be at work in and through us today and always. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 24, 2023

GPS

Weekly Prayer

Holy One, as I turn to you with my whole self, equip me to do the good that you give me to do. Make my words and actions compassionate and kind. Root out any fear or pride, grounding me instead in your wisdom and grace. Guide me to live, and love, with courage. Amen.

Monday, September 25

Scripture: James 3:13-14 CEB

¹³ Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth.

Observation

This section of James begins a "mini-handbook" on Christian wisdom, inviting us to reflect on the gift and presence of God's wisdom in our lives.

Application

What is the best advice you've been given? One that I return to repeatedly, was given to me as a newlywed: "you can have towels folded correctly, or you can have help folding." While at a glance, it might seem to be a snub to one's spouse; instead, the root of this advice is that you can be uncompromising in "your way" or you can live in community. For any relationship to flourish, there must be give and take. A desire to compromise, work together, and put "us" ahead of a singular "me". I find myself applying this lesson to all areas of life! Reflect on some areas of community in

your life. Where do you experience good community? Where might God be inviting you to grow in humility and love?

Prayer

God of wisdom, thank you for inviting me to grow in my understanding of you. And for the many opportunities I find to practice humility, especially when I forget! Continue to forgive and invite me again toward actions that are good and humble, filled with your wisdom, Amen.

Tuesday, September 26

Scripture: James 3:17-18 CEB

¹⁷ What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. ¹⁸ Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.

Observation

The book of James invites us to reflect on the ways that God calls us to live. God is the giver of “every perfect gift” (1:17), and here James expands on what some of these gifts are. If we are made in God’s image, then these characteristics about God are also characteristics about us.

Application

Read these verses again, in this way: *“God is pure, God is peaceful, God is gentle, God is obedient, God is filled with mercy and good actions. God is faithful and genuine. God makes peace. God sows the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.”* Let this rest in your body and heart. How do you feel as you reflect upon God in this way? Now try this: I am pure, I am peaceful, I am gentle... (*and so forth*) How does this feel? Do some descriptors feel easier than others? Do some feel like a challenge or invitation? How might God be inviting you to live into these pieces of God’s wisdom today?

Prayer

God of wisdom, thank you for making me in your image. Expand my understanding of *who* you are and how you are at work in my life and your world. Expand, too, my perception of who I might be, help me to grow in wisdom and likeness of you. Amen.

Wednesday, September 27

Scripture: James 4:1-3 CEB

What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don’t they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? ² You long for something you don’t have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can’t get, so you struggle and fight. You don’t have because you don’t ask. ³ You ask and don’t have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings.

Observation

These opening words from chapter 4 seem a harsh turn from the previous chapter. I don’t know precisely what situation James is responding to here, but I wonder: how can God’s wisdom influence conflict among us? God created us in community, and because we are imperfect persons, that means that any relationship will have conflict. The key, however, is how we navigate conflict with love and grace.

Application

One of the refrains in my home is, “you can be mad, you can’t be mean.” And what I mean by this: is that every emotion is good, being angry can be good and important! However, even when we feel hurt, embarrassed, or ashamed; God calls us to respond in love. It means being careful, even when angry, to speak and act in ways that honor the other person.

Four practices we use in our home to help this: (1) Take a minute to calm down. Count to 10 and take deep breaths. It takes your nervous system about one minute, for that rush to make its way through your system. Allow it to happen, then release it. (2) Remember that you are loved, and you love the person(s) you are angry with. Name a few reasons, if this helps center you. (3) Calmly discuss why you’re hurt, staying to “I” statements. (I heard you say, I felt, I worry...). Assume the best in your companion, listening as they speak, too. (4) Find a resolution, and forgive one another.

Prayer

God of wisdom, thank you for gifting me with a wide variety of emotions in which to experience life! When I experience anger or hurt, keep me grounded in your wisdom and grace. Help me to stay kind, to forgive easily, and to seek restoration in relationships. Be my guide. Amen.

Thursday, September 28

Scripture: James 4: 7-10

⁷ Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you. ⁸ Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Cry out in sorrow, mourn, and weep! Let your laughter become mourning and your joy become sadness. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Observation

God desires relationship with us. Not only when we are good, but always. God invites us to come before God also in times of console, in confession, and in seeking counsel and wisdom. God will sustain and nurture you.

Application

What are the needs of your heart today? How might you come before God, and what might you seek? Take a moment of silence, hold your palms open to receive, and pray:

Prayer

God of wisdom, I offer myself to you. Receive the prayers and longings of my heart. Forgive me for the people and places I have caused harm, or strayed from your goodness. Be at work again within me, receiving me as a sheep of your flock, a lamb of your own redeeming. Amen.

Friday, September 29

Scripture: Galatians 6:9-10

⁹ Let’s not get tired of doing good, because in time we’ll have a harvest if we don’t give up. ¹⁰ So then, let’s work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith.

Observation

Let us not get tired of doing good. We’ve jumped over to the book of Galatians, and receive

encouragement of *doing good*. Our efforts of following Jesus, loving God and our neighbor *do* make an impact in the world. In big and small ways, you have been part building up the kingdom of God.

Application

Take time today and reflect upon the experience of *doing good*. First, make a list of 5 times when you have “done good” by loving others, fighting injustices, and making peace in our world. Then, make a list of 5 times you have been a recipient of another’s goodness. Bring these to God in prayer and gratitude today.

Prayer

God of wisdom, help me to find rest in your. When I feel tired or discouraged, lift me up. Help me to see the ways that my words and actions have impacted others, and grown your kingdom. Amen.

Saturday, September 30

Scripture: Philippians 4:1-8

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord. Loved ones, ²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. ³Yes, and I’m also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life.

⁴Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

⁸From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

Observation

Notice how this chapter begins, Paul is asking the recipient to encourage Euodia and Syntyche in their ministry, knowing it has been a difficult time. Then, beginning in verse 4, Paul offers encouragement. Paul rejoices in the Lord, encourages prayer, and directs us to receive God’s wisdom.

Application

This passage feels similar in tone and message to what we learned from James this week. God desires that we know God’s wisdom, that we are grounded in what is pure, true, holy, and admirable. And God knows, that it won’t always be easy! Keep this passage handy today, and read it whenever you need encouragement of God’s presence in your life.

Prayer

God of wisdom, you are the source of all good and perfect things. Thank you for naming me among your beloved creation. Guide me today, that my eyes and ears, my mouth and hands are directed by your wisdom and peace. Help me to release any anxiety, and to trust in your. Reveal to me what is true and holy, all that is just and pure. Be with me today and always. Amen.