

This is Us: Living our Faith – Stay in Love with God

James 5:13-16 and John 15:5,7-11

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Pastor Tami Luckhardt

How many of you have one of these at your house somewhere? This is a power strip. You plug this into the wall and then you can plug a lot of things into the power of that strip. I have one of these in my living room and it's got a lot of things plugged into it; my cable box, speakers, my Roomba and a lamp. This power strip takes power from the tremendous resources of Xcel Energy and then it gives power to all of those other devices. A lot of things depend on this power strip.

And just like that power strip, a lot of things depend on me; my family, this church, this staff, the boards that I serve on, and the people that I visit and minister to throughout the week. To some degree they all depend on me for leadership, guidance, assistance, teaching, friendship. Like this power strip, a lot of things depend on me.

But unlike this power strip, way too often, I do this. Instead of plugging into a source that gives me power to help other people, I just plug into myself. I try to do it all in my own power. I often wake up in the morning thinking about how much I have to do. So much so that I don't have time to pray. I spend my day running from one commitment to the next thinking I got to do this, I got to fix this, I've got to make this right. On some days, I am what Pastor Craig Groeschel calls a Christian atheist. I believe in God, but I don't live like God really exists. So what about you? Are you a Christian atheist? Do you believe in God but live as if God doesn't really exist? If you are, are you willing to admit this and ask God to help you to change that?

We are in the last week of our series *This is Us, Living Our Faith* where we've been looking at scripture from the New Testament book of James and as well as the 3 General Rules given by John Wesley to the early Methodists that are still so relevant to us today and can help us live lives of genuine faith. Here's the 3 rules. Say them with me. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. Two weeks ago, I talked about Wesley's first rule, do no harm. I chose to focus on the harm that we do with our words because I don't think we realize how much damage we can do just by what we say. Last week, Pastor Bethany talked about his second rule, do good. She focused on several acts of kindness and goodness that remind us how powerful it is when we individually embody our faith.

Today we come to the last of Wesley's General Rules which is to stay in love with God. That means to maintain a close, personal relationship with God. This is really the most important one. I am not sure why Wesley didn't start with this one. Because if you don't do this one, you won't have the power to do the other two. If we don't start with a close, personal relationship with God, we're going to find it very hard to do no harm and to do good for any extended period of time.

Now I used the image of the power strip, but Jesus used a different image, an image that people of his day would have recognized right off the bat, a grapevine. The roots of the vine go down deep into the soil. They draw out water and nutrients from the soil. Then the vine grows up and then it spreads along the trellis. Then branches sprout from the vine. And if the branches can stay connected... that's all they need to do is stay connected... then the nutrients from the vine will flow through the branches and produce grapes.

Think about and then look what Jesus says in John verse 5, *I am the vine. You are the branches.* The branch is dependent on the vine to get the water and the nutrients from the soil and bring it to the branch. That's a picture of total dependence. And friends, that's the kind of relationship Jesus wants to have with you. A relationship of total dependence. Now, if I were to break off one of the branches

what would happen to that branch? It would die, right? And in the same way, that's what happens to you and me spiritually when we don't stay connected to Jesus.

Let's keep reading in verse 5, Jesus says *If you remain in me/abide and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything.* If I don't stay connected to Jesus, I am like this power strip. Apart from Jesus, I can do nothing.

You may say, Pastor Tami, what are you talking about? All kinds of people aren't connected to Jesus, and they do all kinds of wonderful things. That's true, but are they the things that really matter? Are they the things that last for eternity and have a kin(g)dom impact? Look at verse 16, Jesus said, *"You didn't choose me, but I chose you .... so that you could go and produce fruit... fruit that could last."* We can only bear the kind of fruit that will last for eternity if the power of Christ is flowing through us. And if I go through the day, trying to show love to other people, but I'm not plugged into the power source, then I am trying to give away something that I don't have. Jesus says, apart from me, you can do nothing. You are like a branch that has to stay connected. You are like a power strip that must stay plugged in. If you don't stay connected to Jesus and you go out in the world trying to do no harm and do good, then you are trying to give away something you don't have and, in the end, you might end up doing more harm than good.

Jesus says, abide in me. What does it mean to abide. Let me ask you a question. Geographically speaking, where do you live? Some of you might say Plymouth, others might say Wayzata, Maple Grove, others, Bloomington, Indiana, Florida, or Georgia. Geographically, that's where you live. Now, let me ask you this question. Spiritually, where do you live? If you're being honest, some of you might say, I live in fear. I live in anger. I live in doubt. I live in constant stress. I live in perpetual busy-ness. I live in a state of constant rebellion against God. What Jesus is saying here is quit living in those places and come live in me.

To abide means to live somewhere. So physically, I live on 15th Street in Farmington. That's my home base. That's where I go to rest. That's where I go to find nourishment. That's where I go to watch the Vikings beat.... anybody! That's where I go to spend time with the human beings that I love the most. Physically, I live on 15th Street.

Spiritually, it ought to be the same with Jesus. Jesus is where I go to find strength, that's where I go to find nourishment, to find peace. That's where I go to find rest for my soul. Where I go to spend time with the person I love the most. As we go through life, we're going to feel fear. We're going to feel stress. We're going to feel hassled and frustrated. But we don't have to live there. We can make a choice as we go through those things to not take up residence there but to run home to Jesus.

To stay in love with God is not unlike marriage – what keeps us in love? It wouldn't work if I kept saying to Jerry, "you know that I love you – after all I married you, didn't I?" How long would our marriage last if I never did anything to build up that relationship. To build up the relationship – to stay in love - requires spending time together and communicating and practicing daily acts of service toward each other. So it is with God.

How do you stay in love with God? Let me share some real specific things with you. These are some things that John Wesley mentions in his third general rule. This one was not originally worded to *stay in love with God* but to *attend upon the ordinances of God*. The ancient language has been updated to more modern language that we use today... *stay in love with God*. And Wesley listed six practices that we should incorporate into our lives that will help us to just that.

First, Wesley says we should **attend worship**. Worship is where we gather to glorify God and to remember God's presence in our lives. Worship reinforces our faith so we can go out of these doors and into another week, ready to live out our faith.

Second, he says we should **study scripture**. It is through the word of God that we receive comfort and instruction. The word of God guides our lives and helps us to learn more about God and our faith. Through the Bible, God speaks to us, challenges us, sharpens our lives through the stories and teachings of the Bible. Listening to sermons and devotionals also work to help connect the scriptures to our daily lives and current context.

Third, Wesley says that we should **partake of communion** on a regular basis. In his life, Wesley received communion almost daily. It's an important and meaningful sacrament that connects us to God's grace and reminds us of Christ's sacrifice and the restoration of God's kingdom here on earth. It's one that we will celebrate this Sunday here today as we join with Christians all around the world on the World Communion Sunday. It's through this communal act of confession and grace and redemption, that we are drawn closer to God and experience God's grace once again.

Fourth, he says to **pray**. We should be praying on more than just Sunday mornings. Prayer should be a regular discipline in our daily life, so we are connecting with God on a regular basis throughout our day. Prayer is communication with God and if we want to grow that relationship, like any relationship, it takes communication and quality time. We need to talk to God. We also need to listen to God.

How often should I pray? I've suggested before that you pray at least 5 times a day. And the fingers on our hands remind us of that, to pray when we get up in the morning, breakfast, lunch, dinner and when we go to bed at night. You can begin to pray by simply saying thank you.

Then over time, you can add to that prayer. Still using the five fingers of our hands, we can remember how to pray.

Thumb, WOW! God you are amazing. You are awesome and I adore you.

First finger, thank you.

Middle finger, I'm sorry.

Ring finger, think about your relationships and pray for others.

Pinky, the smallest finger, God, use me. So that's how to pray.

Fifth, Wesley says to **practice fasting**. When we give something up, like a meal or an activity, we can use that time to focus on our faith. If we pass on lunch one day, we can use that time to maybe go for a walk and refocus on God. You might consider a social media fast. Get off your device or television. Turn off your electronics to have that time for silent reflection with no distractions. Just as we make things certain priorities in our lives, sacrificing things so we can attend to those priorities, so should we be making those sacrifices to make our faith a priority. And to grow in our love for God.

Finally, Wesley advises that we should **spend time with other Christian believers**. At the last supper, Jesus gathered his friends and said, *I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other.* So another part of abiding in Christ in Christian fellowship, spend time with other Christian believers. Building relationships of love with other Christians, in faith groups or a Bible study, at men's breakfast, choir rehearsal and band practice.

So worship, reading the Bible, praying, partaking in Holy Communion, fasting, and spending time with other Christian believers, these are all things that you can do to practice staying in love with God to the point where you are totally dependent on God, where you are clinging to the vine, holding on for dear life, basing everything you do and everything you say on your relationship to the vine to the

point where it is completely second nature to say wow, Jesus. thank you, Jesus. I'm sorry, Jesus. Help me, Jesus. I love you, Jesus.

Let me end with James' words from the very ends his letter...no matter the circumstance *If any of you are suffering, they should pray. If any of you are happy, they should sing. If any of you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church, and the elders should pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health. And if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*

James tells us to confess our sins with one another so we can continually accept the grace of God in our lives, the grace of God that heals us. God calls us to practice our faith not only so we can find the comfort that we need but so that we can comfort and support others in this family of faith. When we work on staying in love with God, we not only grow our own faith, we also grow our witness of our faith to others.

So let me ask you, are you able to bring everything to Christ? Is your relationship with Christ like the relationship of a branch to the vine? Are you able to put your whole trust in Christ, to abide in Christ, to cling to the vine for dear life? Spiritually speaking, where do you live? Jesus says, abide in me. Are you living in him right now? Jesus says, those who abide in me will bear much fruit, fruit that will last. What kind of fruit is your life bearing? Jesus says, apart from me, you can do nothing. Do you believe that? Do you live like that? Do you have genuine faith?

Let's pray. God, forgive us. Forgive us for rushing into the day, day after day, living as though you're not even there. Plugging into our own power instead of plugging into you. Forgive us, God for the arrogance for believing we can do it all by ourselves, for thinking that getting stuff done is more important than spending time with you. O God, I pray that this morning that you would convince us in our hearts that there is nothing more important for us to do than to be your child. And convince us God that if we go out trying to do good without spending time with you, we're just going to run out of power. Help us, God above, to stay in love with you. Amen.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023**

### **Daily Prayer**

Loving One, thank you for the gifts of prayer and praise. Thank you for community and opportunities to heal. Through my study this week, let my love and commitment for you grow. Keep me in love with you, and let that love illuminate my way of being in the world. May the love of Jesus define and refine me. Amen.

### **Monday, October 2**

#### **Scripture: John 15:1-5**

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

## **Observation**

Israelites often saw themselves as part of a vineyard God tended (Psalm 80:8-18, Isaiah 5:1-7). A golden sculpture of a vine over the porch of the Jerusalem Temple reinforced the image. But when Jesus used that image, he made it more personal and more challenging. Only as his followers stayed connected to him like branches to a vine, Jesus said, would their lives bear the kind of fruit God sought.

## **Application**

Jesus was definite: “A branch can’t produce fruit by itself but must remain in the vine.” In our high-achieving, Type A culture, do you ever find yourself tugged in the direction of thinking you can produce fruit by yourself? Are you plugged into your own power strip so that your good intentions and determination are all you need to lead a life pleasing to God? We’ll see this week that Jesus did call us to work with him. But given that, why do you believe he said you cannot do it by yourself?

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, you are the vine; I am a branch. Keep me so closely connected to you that I will be a branch that bears good fruit. Amen.

## **Tuesday, October 3**

### **Scripture: Matthew 7:12, 15-20**

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

## **Observation**

Jesus didn’t offer quick, easy surface change. He focused on the deep inner roots from which life springs. Like prophets before him, he warned about false prophets (Jeremiah 6:13-14; Ezekiel 22:28). They challenged Jesus’ followers, too (Acts 20:29). But Jesus’ main concern was not for us to play “gotcha” toward others, even false prophets. Jesus wanted us to know how to recognize them because following them can damage the roots of our life, and the kind of fruit we bear.

## **Application**

Jesus said we learn about a tree’s inner makeup from the fruit it bears—grape vines bear grapes; apple trees bear apples. In the end, the key spiritual reality is not how good we look publicly, but whether our way of life springs from our connection with God or not. We often apply these verses mainly to religious leaders who fail morally—but the principle works the other way too. Are there people you have learned to trust more as you have seen the fruit of their life and work? What kind of “fruit” do you find most persuasive? How closely does your inner life align with the public “face” you show at church? What makes inward reality more valuable than outward show in God’s sight?

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, I’m willing to make every effort to become the person you call me to be—or at least I want to be willing to do that. Please add your power to my effort. Amen

## **Wednesday, October 4**

### **Scripture: 1 John 3:14-18**

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

### **Observation**

The apostle John said no one filled with God's love could see a brother or sister in need and not try to help. John Wesley wrote of a time when he lived this out: "At Hannam, four miles from Bristol ... I made a collection in our congregation for the relief of the poor, [outside] Lawford's gate; who, having no work ... and no assistance from the parish wherein they lived, were reduced to the last extremity. I made another collection on Thursday and a third on Sunday, by which we were enabled to feed a hundred, sometimes a hundred and fifty, a day, of those whom we found to need it most."

### **Application**

John used strong words about those who saw their brothers and sisters in need, and didn't care. He said such people hated their brothers and sisters, which made them 7 murderers! How can we become more like Wesley, who instead of saying "Someone ought to help those hungry people" took simple, direct action and helped?

### **Prayer**

Loving Lord, you taught us that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Keep growing a heart within me that rejoices in the freedom and satisfaction of your kind of giving. Amen.

## **Thursday, October 5**

### **Scripture: James 2:14-26**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

### **Observation**

Wesley had learned firsthand the folly of trying to earn God's favor through good works. But he found, as James had, that some other Christians thought "salvation by faith" meant good works are optional. Like James, Wesley knew that true faith produces actions that honor God and bless others.

### **Application**

Notice that James didn't talk about a good balance between faith and works, as though we need a 50-50 mix of the two. We need 100% of both, and our works need to grow out of our faith, as a grateful response to God's gracious acceptance of us. What are some of the actions, the works, which you have seen grow in your life as you have responded to God's grace?

### **Prayer**

Loving Lord, you have accepted me as your child, and you have begun to reshape the way I live as I respond to your grace. Please continue your work in my life. May my faith be genuine and may my works always bring you glory. Amen.

## **Friday, October 6**

### **Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46**

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

### **Observation**

From history, we can see that John Wesley and his followers made a big impact for good, first in England and then in America. But it took many, many (often small) acts of grace and caring. In his sermon “The Reward of the Righteous,” Wesley urged his hearers, “While you are promoting this comprehensive charity, which contains feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, lodging the stranger; indeed all good works in one; let those animating words be written on your hearts, and sounding in your ears: ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me.’”

### **Application**

What word or phrase speaks to you from scripture? Wesley called the Methodists to the kind of life Jesus calls his followers to live. What are the main ways you are involved in honoring God by serving others? Consider serving in one way you never have before. (If you need ideas, you’ll find many here for our Make a Difference Day. <https://www.messiahchurch.org/make-a-difference-days-2023/>)

### **Prayer**

O God, keep my eyes and my heart open to see your face in the faces of hurting people around me who need your touch through me. Amen.

## **Saturday, October 7**

### **Scripture: Acts 13:36**

“Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed.

### **Observation**

Religion that honors God is a religion that has feet, and you are called to serve God’s purposes in your generation. Just as David was considered great because he served God’s purposes, if you want to make a positive difference in this world you must seek out God’s purpose and plan for your life. But to do so you must get out of your comfort zone and be involved with your feet and hands.

### **Application**

How have you gotten out of your comfort zone lately in serving others?

### **Prayer**

Lord, give me eyes to see where I can offer help and hope. Give me a heart that loves so that I can use my feet to step out of my comfort zone and serve you by doing no harm, doing good and staying in love with you each and every day. Amen.