



Week 1 Preaching Resources: Genuine Faith

Scripture Passage:

James 2:1-7; 14-17

Focus Statement:

Genuine faith not only affects personal existence, but also produces change in the world.

ME:

In what ways has your personal faith affected the way that you live in the world? Share an example of a growth point in your faith or perhaps a way you've seen others' personal convictions play out in their lives. Consider sharing how this series will speak specifically about Wesleyan heritage, connecting that heritage to its Biblical foundations through the lens of the epistle of James. The first week sets the tone by describing the connection John Wesley made between faith and personal and social holiness. Each of the following weeks looks at one of Wesley's General Rules in connection with a passage from James. More information about the General Rules can be found here:

<https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>.

WE:

Many of us have had times when we got too comfortable in our faith and neglected areas where we could keep growing. And many of us have gotten to a place in life where our faith is comfortably in a box, and we take it out only in certain places like at church, home, around certain friends and family, but not around everyone. But faith is not a matter of convenience. Faith is not meant to be just a thought or feeling that brings us comfort. It is meant to change the way we live.

GOD:

The community receiving this letter was experiencing something we often see now as well. Wealthy visitors to the synagogue or church were being welcomed and given a place of honor whereas poor visitors were being told to sit at the feet of the wealthy. How often do we see people's social status or monetary worth, and either extend grace or overlook people based on it? This practice, both in the ancient world and now is a reflection of worldly values.

Genuine faith in Jesus Christ challenges the worldly values that we often inherit from the culture around us, (favoritism, prejudices, etc.). The text teaches us that discrimination or "partiality" is a sin. In Christ, all have value, whether poor or rich, regardless of position or status. The letter goes even further to point out that God has "chosen the poor... to be heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him," (verse 5). God loves everyone but God will bring about justice for those who are oppressed.

Genuine faith produces changed lives, good works, and social change. But it is often tempting to think we are saving ourselves or earning salvation by doing these things. People often have trouble with understanding that Jesus alone does the work of salvation: not us, not our works, or gifts, but only Jesus. No one deserves salvation more than another. This does not mean that faith is passive. *Faithful work is the result of our salvation, not the cause of our salvation.* When



James says in verse 14, “Can faith save you?” he’s not implying that we save ourselves through faith *or* good works but that good works are the productive signs of our faith. Our human response of faith is itself a gift of grace from God and this faith, if genuine, produces good works. In this way, our actions and our lives show other people what we believe, witnessing to what Jesus has done for us and in us.

For Wesley, it’s not just about responding personally in faith, but that response also has implications for the world we live in. We see this in the book of James, where faith affects the social system. The kin(g)dom of God flips the value system of our broken world upside down. As Christians, we are called to live as kin(g)dom people here and now. When you look at this from a Wesleyan perspective, there is no personal holiness that is not ultimately social holiness. If the values of your faith do not play out in your social existence, then it is questionable if you really hold these values in your personal existence. “Christianity is a social religion; to turn it into a solitary affair is to destroy it,” (John Wesley).

YOU:

Faith does not exist in a box. Faith truly becomes faith when you take it out and exemplify it for the world around you to see. How do you live out a faith that believes that Jesus Christ came for all and all have a place in the kin[g]dom? This also means not being ashamed to be a living testimony to God’s grace and mercy. Where do we still see favoritism at work in our church or community, be it prejudice or classism, or just overlooking people? In what ways do we exclude people, possibly through insider language, or closed circles, etc.?

WE:

Imagine what our city or town might look like if the church was known more for what it did in the community than ____ (the stained glass windows, the organ, or whatever applies to your building.) What if, in our mission, we saw people as whole persons, children of God, rather than just identifying them with one of their needs (poor, hungry, etc.)? It’s impossible to truly be the church we are called to be if we keep our faith in a box, or a building, or on one day of the week, and we never let it change the world around us.



Week 2 Preaching Resources: Do No Harm

Scripture Passage:

James 3:1-12 (Note: Consider using a translation that will make the images and analogies of this passage as clear as possible to your congregation/context).

Focus Statement:

Words hold the power of life and death. What you say matters: speak life and back up your words with actions.

ME:

Think about words that you remember from the past, a time when words have done damage to you and/or really helped you through a difficult time. What sticks out? How has that stayed with you? How did the spirit or attitude in which the words were spoken affect you?

WE:

Invite the congregation to reflect upon moments in their own lives when something someone has said has stuck with them, especially perhaps in the church. We have all been both hurt and helped by words and the ways others have treated us. Likewise, whether we like to admit it or not, we have probably used our words in ways that have harmed others, as well as helped them.

GOD:

James 3:1-4 focuses on the role and responsibility of teachers, specifically Christian teachers. What we say about God in public is given a lot of weight. If we, as public figures, are misdirecting people, we are doing harm. So, it is important that teachers and preachers try their best in their public ministry of the word. False teaching in churches can do great harm and it is not a job to be taken lightly. When James admonishes not many to become teachers, he is highlighting the importance of humility. We don't have it all figured out. Yes, we will all make mistakes, but if we recognize that what we say matters, and the potential harm our words can cause, we can move forward in humility. This is related to the connection between personal and social holiness we discussed last week. The words we speak as individuals, especially as leaders, do not just stay with us, they have a social impact.

James 3:5-12 moves from discussing the speech of teachers to the power of words in general. James uses many analogies to describe this. We can all use our words to wound/kill or to heal. Words are powerful. Many people say they "Love God, but hate the church." Many people have been very hurt by the church. Sometimes we, as Christians and just as people, cause harm to others with our words and sometimes we cause harm because our words and actions or attitudes do not match up. As James points out, we can praise God on Sunday and then say hurtful things about and to other people – all of whom are made in the very image of that same God (verse 9). Or, we can say things that sound nice and then act in a way that contradicts our words or simply fails to live up to them. There is a deep sense of hypocrisy because of this very thing; the same mouth should not be blessing and cursing.



John Wesley's first General Rule for the people who gathered to "work out their salvation," (see Philippians 2:12) and which are still in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* today, is to do no harm. Part of doing no harm is not just our actions towards other people, but also our words, and having our words and actions "say the same thing". Wesley gives examples. For instance, avoid uncharitable or unprofitable conversation; particularly speaking evil of magistrates or of ministers. As our salvation "bears fruit" or produces goodness in the world, it should change the way we talk about and to people; we need to pay attention to how we talk in civil discourse, how we express our opinions and listen to others with different viewpoints. When we simply complain or insult our opponents, it shuts down communication.

YOU:

Consider asking the congregation to think of the most recent time in their life when tensions were high. What did they say in the situation? How did their words contribute to the tension or cause harm? What needs to happen now to reconcile or prevent that from happening in the future?

Challenge your congregants to think about how others receive their words when they are deciding if and how to express something. Speak honestly, but also be prepared to accept the honest reaction you get.

How does your faith affect the way you speak to and with others? How does your personal holiness affect the way you interact with others and even the way you respond when someone says something that is hurtful?

WE:

Think about what your church is known for in the community. Encourage people to think about what their own vision of the church is (friendly, loving) versus what others on the "outside" might see when they look at us? How do our words and actions as a church impact the community we are a part of? Would they miss us if we closed?

Many people have had bad experiences with the church in the past, which has given them a bad impression of it. How can we work to change that? Offer concrete examples or invite concrete examples. Often people like/love Jesus but hate the church. How can we act and speak to be more Christlike?



Week 3 Preaching Resources: Do Good

Scripture Passage:

James 3:13-18,(4:1-3)

Focus Statement:

God's wisdom is pure, peace-loving, gentle at all times and willing to yield to others.

ME:

Share about a time when it seemed the way to get ahead was to act from "worldly wisdom" - playing hard ball, intimidation, etc. (e.g. book - *Winning Through Intimidation*). You may have gotten your way, but what damage was caused in the process? With wisdom from above, the ends do not always justify the means. The means matter.

WE:

At some point in our lives, we all have to learn the lesson that personal gain cannot be the sole motivation for doing good. True good comes from a right spirit. Where in our society can we identify disorder and evil? Can we trace that back to selfish ambition and jealousy (v.16)?

GOD:

James 3:13-18 identifies two sources of wisdom: wisdom from above (Godly, Spirit-inspired) and "wisdom" from below (worldly, self-centered). They produce different things. Wisdom from above produces good (v. 18 - peace and justice) whereas wisdom from below does harm. We see the repeated theme here (v. 13) that a life infused with wisdom from above leads to good works, not to bring about our own salvation but as a response to what God has done.

Verse 16 shows the connection between personal and social holiness that Wesley was so focused on. When we act from envy and selfish ambition, it will lead to disorder - not just for you, but for the social order, whereas when we act from a peaceable, gentle, and merciful place, we create a more just and righteous world for all to live in. The theme of hypocrisy that we explored last week comes up again in this passage. When our motives and intentions match our actions, both coming from a place of godly wisdom, our "good lives" (v.13) will be the evidence; however when we have selfish motivations and intentions, James warns us "do not be false to the truth." Even if our external actions appear to be good, the result will be "disorder and wickedness of every kind," (v. 16). You may want to offer an example of when someone tries to look as though they are doing something good but really it is for personal gain.

Wesley's second General Rule is "Do good." The way we approach other people is meant to be from a place of gentleness, purity, and selflessness, when so much of the world tells us to approach others with the idea of "What can they do for me?" In the General Rules, Wesley emphasizes that "doing good" is not about receiving praise or getting ahead in the world, rather it is about faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus who gave up everything for humankind. People are to do good, "by running the race which is set before them, denying themselves [i.e., their own ambitions], and taking up their cross daily; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men[sic] should say all manner of evil of them *falsely*, for the Lord's sake."



YOU:

Good cannot be good unless it is good for all people. Wisdom helps us to discern what is good. When we look at the things we do, we need to think about “Is this good for all? Or is this just good for me?” Suggest some concrete actions that display wisdom from above.

WE:

What would it look like if we really lean into and discern God’s wisdom in the life of the church (give examples relevant to your church - church council meeting, making decisions, how to start a new ministry, etc.) What would it look like to always begin by remembering God’s presence in these activities?

Think about the greater good (creating something beneficial for everyone) versus the common good (keeping the peace). Think about the intention behind the action. Both are “good” but the greater good really comes out of a kin(g)dom mentality, versus just trying to maintain the status quo.



Week 4 Preaching Resources: Stay in Love with God

Scripture Passage:

James 5:13-20

Focus Statement:

Being in love with God isn't about getting what we want; it's all about relationship.

ME:

Share about a time when you experienced God's grace and how (e.g. singing hymns, receiving communion, etc.). Think about sharing some of the spiritual disciplines or practices that have helped you cultivate your relationship with God and sustained you through difficult times.

WE:

There are times when we all need support from others. That support can be a sharing of God's love with us. And there are also things we can do to cultivate our spiritual lives and support others. Think about some of the church practices (or non-church practices) that help you connect to God.

GOD:

It's important to name the difficulty that this passage raises. It can be interpreted to mean that it is our prayers and faith that heal and save people, the implication being that if someone is not healed or saved that there has not been enough faith or praying. That is not the case. Doing these things does not guarantee that things will always go the way we want them to, but rather we can find a peace with whatever happens because we have brought all our concerns to God. When we live a life of genuine faith, rooted in grace and shaped by Wesley's General Rules, we can begin to see and understand that even when things don't happen the way we want them to, God is with us. Our prayers are that, "thy will be done," not "my will be done". Even Jesus struggled with this (in the prayer of Gethsemane), but he ultimately bowed to God's will. Our faith is not contingent on God answering prayers the way we want God to.

Staying in love with God, or keeping the ordinances of God, is not something we do with the goal of getting what we want, but rather grounds us in a faith relationship with God that can help us endure whatever life brings.

The passage lists several concrete practices the church was doing in the first century: praying, anointing with oil (visible sign of invisible grace), confessing sins and forgiving, singing praises. These types of actions are concrete ways that they and we can "stay in love with God." There are others that Wesley discusses - receiving the Lord's supper, attending church, etc. This list is not exhaustive, but it gives us examples of what Christians can do together that, over time, shape a way of life. We do not do these things to be "religious" and tick off boxes, but to enter into grace through means that God has provided for us.

The passage suggests that no matter what our circumstances, we can bring them to God in both worship and prayer. This is not just abstract but made concrete in the life of the church. The church does not exist only for our own personal/individual religion but as a place to care for one another with the love of God and accompany one another in Christian faith. This is a key aspect of Wesleyan faith (see *Book of Discipline*, par. 102, pgs. 53-4).



Another aspect of this passage, in verses 19-20, talks about those who have strayed from their faith and are brought back. It illustrates the concern of the early church to care for one another's souls, encourage one another, and be the grace of God to others. Given that the whole letter ends on this note, it shows the importance of God's love always extending to each and every one of us, no matter where we've been or what we've done.

YOU:

Encourage congregants to think of one practice that helps them to feel grounded. How can they work on that practice for one month? Offer some concrete examples (pray every day, go to church every Sunday this month, listen to one sermon podcast a week, etc).

Are there people who once had a vibrant faith and have wandered from it? Are there ways we can lovingly and non-judgmentally reach out to them and invite them back into relationship, remembering God's grace always abounds?

WE:

What does it look like for this community to be deeply grounded in their pursuit of sanctification? How are we taking Jesus seriously, not only in our personal lives but in what we do for each other and the world? Christ's hope and Wesley's hope for us is that our faith, lived out, our journey of sanctification would become a lifestyle. Our mission is to "Make disciples for the transformation of the world." There is always a connection between personal and social holiness. The congregation is shaped by the practices of the church in such a way as to bring the world closer to God.