

Series: Faith that Makes a Difference

“Faith that Grows”

Introduction: I’ve noticed that there are a lot of people in this Covid-19 spring who, because summer travel plans have been canceled and they’re planning to stay close to home, are now working hard in their gardens. Parking lots at garden centers have been filled to overflowing. Rama reports that some of her favorite types of flowers and plants are hard to find. However, that hasn’t stopped her from filling our back deck with trays of other kinds of flowers as well as bags of potting soil! Of course, to have a beautiful, flourishing garden, you can’t just plant various flowers; you need to maintain what has been planted. In particular, you need to both weed and water so that what’s been planted grows properly.

The same, actually, is true of our life as followers of Jesus. Our life of faith is not something that is, or should be, static, planted within us and then we’re done. If we want our faith to make a difference in the world, if we want to deepen our love for God and our neighbor, if we want our church community to become like a beautiful, flourishing garden, we must constantly be about the work of weeding and watering. We find such exhortation in the letter left to us by James, the leader of the early church in Jerusalem, and one of the half-brothers of Jesus. His call for his people to weed and water is summed up like this: “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (1:21). Let’s read the whole section, and then we’ll see how James helps us to nurture a faith that grows so that we will have a faith that makes a difference.

I. Planted

A. As we have seen, James is writing to followers of Jesus who have been chased from their homes and their jobs through persecution, and scattered throughout the region of Palestine. In the midst of such trials, James writes out of loving, pastoral concern, encouraging them to persevere in their faith and reminding them that God can use such trials to mature them. Importantly, these are folks who have already had the word, by faith and the work of Jesus, “planted” in them. They have been given new birth by God, James writes a bit earlier, through the “word of truth” (v. 18).

B. Before going further, let’s take a step back for a moment and take a wide-angle view of the power of God’s word. From the very beginning we see that God brings life through his word. “And God said” is the refrain we hear as the book of Genesis opens and paints for us a picture of God’s creative process. God also “breathes” the breath of his Spirit into the man formed from the dust in order to fill him with life. A bit later, God speaks his law to Moses, directives that would provide his people with the very best way to live. The prophet Isaiah describes God’s word as being like rain and snow, which waters the earth, making it bud and flourish, accomplishing its life-giving purposes (Isa. 55:10-11). Jesus is identified as the “word made flesh” (Jn. 1:1-14) through whom God deals with human sin and death and begins his new creation. The words Jesus goes on to speak are said to be filled with the Spirit and life (Jn. 6:63), and like seeds sown by a farmer (Mk. 4). Such words, Paul would later write, are what the Spirit uses as his “sword” to shape us anew (Eph. 6:17). Through the word, God not only brings us new life but provides the means for us to mature and grow in such life, once that word has been “planted” in us. We are not just sinners saved by grace, though that is wonderfully true; we are a new creation in Christ that is being transformed through his word back into his beautiful image.

II. Weeding

A. But for such new life to grow and emerge, we must be about the tasks of weeding and watering. In describing the weeds, James does not mince his words: *moral filth* and *evil* is how he names them! He uses such strong words because quite simply, anything which threatens to choke out the righteous life that God desires for us is filthy and evil. Throughout his letter, James gives us examples of what this righteous life looks like. At the beginning of this section he names being a good listener and one who is able to control his or her anger. At the end he adds watching our words and taking care of those who are weak and suffering. He also talks about not being “polluted by the world,” by which he means guarding against taking on the world’s standards as our plumb line for life. As an example of the world’s standards, he’ll go on in chapter 2 (as we’ll see next week) to talk about favoritism and discrimination, stuff we’re still having to wrestle with today.

B. So, any impatience, bitterness, selfishness, pride, and privilege must be rooted out if we want to live the righteous life that God desires for us. If we just listen to the word describe these things, but fail to act by yanking them out, James says that it’s like we’ve looked in a mirror and walked away, forgetting what we look like. It would be like saying racism is a bad thing, but then doing nothing about it. Now, a couple of brief observations here. First, as with the weeds in our gardens, pulling them out is not a one-time event. Some of the old weeds, like we’re sadly seeing with racism, keep coming back, year after and generation after generation. We need to be ruthless in going after them, seeking to find their roots. Second, sometimes it can take a while to learn what a weed looks like.

Illustration: I recall my first days of working on a landscaping crew during college summers. When my boss instructed me to begin by weeding a customer’s garden bed, I just looked blankly at him and said, “It’s all green to me!” I had no clue what was a weed and what wasn’t. But gradually, over the summer, it became clear. However, I’m still learning! Just last week I wacked down with our string trimmer what I thought were weeds but which Rama later (gently) informed me were flocks which just hadn’t flowered yet because it’s still early in the season!

C. This is where the word of God is so important. Notice one of the ways James refers to it: the “perfect law that gives freedom” (v. 25). We may at first think that this is a contradiction in terms. How can law bring freedom? Isn’t law meant to restrict us? So, we may do all we possibly can to find ways around what God has said, or ponder what we might be able to get away with. Peter’s question of Jesus: “how many times must I forgive...?” or the lawyer’s question: “And who is my neighbor?” come to mind here (Ma. 18:21; Lk. 10:29). But, like if we’re visiting England and really trust that driving on the left side of the road is for our good and also the good of others, if we trust the word of God, we will find over time our designer and creator may actually know what he’s talking about! Though his word may restrict us in some ways, it provides far more genuine freedom than we might imagine, freedom to grow into all that God desires us to be, for ourselves and for our neighbor.

D. Putting what we hear into practice is also the way, as James undoubtedly heard Jesus teach on more than one occasion, that we can build our lives on solid ground and therefore be able to stand firm when the storms of life come upon us (cf. Ma. 7:24-27).

III. Watering

A. So, we must water ourselves regularly and deeply with this word of God. This watering cannot be like a quick glance in the mirror but, as James puts it, is to involve humbly accepting and an intently looking. To accept something humbly assumes a posture of receptivity. To look at something intently carries the connotation of bending over or stooping so that we can examine something more closely and carefully. Thus, our watering the word that has been planted, to keep with our gardening image, must not be a brief spray, but a kind of soaking. When applied to what we read, humbly and intently describe the difference between reading for information, or for formation. How we read, in other words, is significant.

1. To read for information, which is the way most of us read most of the time, we come to the text as it's master and try to cover as much ground as we can as quickly as we can. Often, we're looking for information to help us solve a problem, or win an argument, or increase our knowledge. All of these things may happen, but such reading won't really change the quality of who we are. It won't help us love God or our neighbor more deeply.

2. For that to happen we must read for formation. In this approach, we come to the text not as its master but as its object. The point is not to get through the text as quickly as we can but to slowly allow the text to get through to us. The desire is not to find a solution, or more information, but to find more of God, to meet him and allow him to address us in some way. The best way I know to do this is to read a short portion of text, 8-10 verses, two or three times, until a word or a phrase strikes you, and then be willing to sit with that word or phrase and prayerfully interact with God over it. Why that word Lord? How does it address my life today? Is there an invitation for you in it, a way that God is calling to put what you've heard into practice?

For further explanation on this, I invite you to visit our website and look at our pandemic prayer practices, weeks #2 and #7, and/or "Lectio Divina" (which means holy reading) under the tab "Learn and Grow."

B. Certainly, there is a healthy interplay between an informational and a formational kind of reading. Rightly done, our informational reading should inform and aid our formational reading. But if we stop at information, and never put ourselves in a position to be addressed by the text, we're not going to be properly "watering" the life-giving word that God has planted within us and we'll fall short of becoming the beautiful, flourishing garden that God desires his church to be.

As God put it to his people through the prophet Jeremiah: we want to be like trees planted by streams of water that do not fear when heat comes and which never fail to bear fruit (Jer. 17:8), the fruit of a deeper love of God, the fruit of a broader love of our neighbor, and the fruit of a faith that makes a difference in our troubled world.