

The Good Life

Part 4 of Sermon Series: *A Faith That Works*

a sermon based on

James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a
(with reference to Mark 9:30-37)

and delivered on

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God is good {pause} all the time. That's a common call in the church nowadays. Someone says, "God is good," and the response is, "All the time!" Then you go the other way, "All the time," "God is good!" We've not done that here. But for eighteen years that how I began my moment with the children. And we shouted it. It's something to be excited about. Try it with me:

God is good [All the time!]

All the time [God is good!]

Do you believe that? Do you believe that? Do you? Really?

I can't speak for any of you, but I know that there are times when I know it in my brain but I just can't quite feel it in my heart. I want to – not because I start to doubt God, but I doubt my own faith.

In that passage from James that Andrew read a moment ago, he wrote "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly." (Jas 4:3a) I've been fighting the temptation to make this message about how to "ask rightly" to talk about effective prayer. We'll get there, next week, when we conclude this sermon series on "A Faith That Works." This week – today – let's talk about the good life. What is it?

What is the good life? Is it "livin' *la vida loca*"¹? For those of you who can remember the 1980's is it being able to live the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous"? Maybe not that extreme – maybe we can do with less than that. But... what is the good life? How do we know?

Even as Christians, don't we still have that tendency to look at what others have to decide what the good life looks like? That's what James is talking about when he says "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly in order to spend what you get on your own pleasure." (Jas 4:3) He's not just talking about money. He's talking about attitude – about expectations. Not always the ones that we set for ourselves but the ones that get heaped upon us.

I remember in the first church I served, I was driving an eleven year old Nissan Sentra. It had a couple of rust spots on it – "a couple of rust spots". It wasn't a particularly pretty car. A church member mentioned to me that I should get a new car. It didn't look right for the associate pastor to be driving a heap.

My first impulse was to say, "You're on the board. You know what you pay me." But I held my tongue – mostly – and said, "but it's paid for." To me the best kind of car isn't based on the name plate – but that paid for title in my drawer at home. Since then, I've had a couple of new cars – brand new – ten or eleven years later though, I end up with a ten or eleven year old car again. Go figure.

I don't want to sound like I'm scolding that church member. I get it. I like new cars. It just feels nicer to have nice things, doesn't it. But that was the expectation in that community. It was a community in which kids in my youth group got brand new cars if not on their sixteenth birthday, then on high school graduation. The parishioners (for the most part) had some pretty large homes. I was living in a condo that didn't match up. Even though one of the three bedrooms in my condo was larger than the apartment that I lived in while I was in seminary. In fact, my office, here, is bigger than that apartment. I when I lived in that apartment. So what changed?

I don't have anything to back it up – except a gut sense and some experience – but I think most people look around and it seems like everyone else has it more together than "me" (Than "I"). It's even becoming more prevalent.

We don't have to limit our comparisons of our weddings to Charles and Diana's or a soap opera. We don't have to limit our expectations of the ideal home or car to lifestyles of the rich and famous. We can see how good our neighbor's house looks from the outside. We can see the new car in his driveway. Now, we get to see when anyone gets a new car because it'll be right there on Facebook – showing you what you don't have. When you're struggling just to get your kid to do her homework to maybe graduate – there's your friends honor student holding her report card. Why can't my life be like that?

Maybe it's not even something like that. Maybe it's selfie from the top of mountain, and my knees, my lungs can just barely get me from the garage to the kitchen. Maybe it's that picture holding the oversized pants, while you're still worried that the scale will break every time you step on it. (That's a personal one.)

Lord, why can't I...? Why can't I have that?

Although James doesn't use the word, I think he would call this foolishness – because he's calling us to wisdom and understanding, when he says, "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." (Jas 3:13). Did you notice that he didn't say "Show by your good works"? He's talking about an attitude shift.

Even good works can be manipulated. Even good works can be used for manipulation – to gain favor – to gain status. Admit it. It happens to all of us. In the gospel passage I read, the disciples were arguing with each other about who would be the greatest. What did Jesus say, "the one who welcomes a child in my name welcomes me." (Mk 9:37a) That is greatness isn't determined by the good work or the status, but by the motivation for that good work.

We can pray for the same thing – and expect different results depending on how we define the good life. Is the good life having? Or is the good life being able to give? In my own life, the times that my paychecks were growing the fastest was when I striving to increase my giving up top a tithe. But I never prayed for that. God is good all the time – even when we forget to pray.

So – back to that question about the good life, is the good life being seen by your neighbors – your friends – your family as having it all together? Is the good life getting over an illness so that you don't feel cruddy? Or is the good life being well so that you can make your date to serve dinner at the Rockford Rescue Mission? Is the good life getting an extra week of paid vacation so that you can spend more money on an extra week at Disney? Or is the good life getting an extra week of paid vacation because it frees you up to go on a mission trip, or to teach Vacation Bible School and still get the renewal time that you need to be useful?

Not everything that we see is what we think it is. And there is a difference between envy (one of the seven deadly sins – and maybe more importantly two of the ten commandments) there's a difference between envy and admiration. There's a difference between covetousness and admiration. There's a difference between selfish ambition and aspiration.

Knowing that difference is the wisdom that James says comes from above. It's a wisdom that recognizes that the good life isn't about having – whether it's things or status. It's a wisdom that recognizes that the good life is being useful.

I know I had that conversation with people before, often older people in nursing homes who say that they don't feel useful so that they should just die. I don't like to hear that. We're all going to go. It's okay to be accepting of it. But God can and will make us useful even to that last breath if we only let him and ask him for what will make us useful to one another. God is good all the time, not just when we're young and healthy, but when we're feeble or just old. God is good all the time, not just when our bank account is flush, but when we're flat broke. God is

good not just when we have job to feel good about, but when we're unemployed and have time to bless another.

The good life is so much more than what anyone could ever amass. The good life that God is inviting each of us to receive is the good life to give – to bless – and to build up – so that you may not have an abundance of real estate holdings, you have a portion in all those apartments that shelter the homeless. The good life is a life in which although you might have some sort of awful illness, you have the opportunity to help another gain perspective on what really matters because of your faithfulness and your trust (that even when you doubt your own faith) there is not doubt that God is good – not just all the time – but at this time.

AMEN.

¹ Ricky Martin, "Livin' La Vida Loca" (New York: Columbia, 1999)