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Pentecost 15

James 1:17-27
Live as God's Firstfruits

*O Lord, open my lips and my mouth
will declare your praise. Amen.*

Dear friends in Christ,

As a faithful Israelite farmer, Hananiah carefully chose out some of the best his crops as they first began to ripen. He placed these **firstfruits** into a basket and carried them all the way up to Jerusalem.

There in the temple, Hananiah brought the basket before the altar of the LORD and spoke the words Moses had given in Deuteronomy that included this: **the LORD brought us out of Egypt... with miraculous signs and wonders... He brought us to this place and gave us this land... and now I**

bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD have given me (Dt 26).

So Israelite **firstfruits** were an offering from what God himself had given, an offering dedicated to the Lord in trust and thanks, recognizing everything they had was a gift of God's undeserved goodness.

Now listen again to what our lesson from James says: **He (God) chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.**

You and I and all believers, we are **God's Firstfruits**. Just as the Israelite farmer chose out His **firstfruits**, so also God chose you to be His very own!

Only the Lord did not choose us because we were so good or had done anything to please Him. Far from it!

We come into this world with sinful hearts that are not pleasing to the sinless God. Remember what Jesus said in our Gospel lesson? **From within, out of people's hearts come evil thoughts...** and then

that whole list of **evils** Jesus tells us **come from inside**. So we come into this world as the spiritual equivalent of rotten, molding, slimy, stinking fruit.

But the Lord himself changed that! He took us and our displeasing sinfulness, and made us pleasing to Himself. For He took us who were **dead in sin** and **made us alive with Christ**. As James says: **He chose to give us birth through the word of truth**.

Through His Word, God gave us a whole new life. He created faith in Jesus, who as the Son of God was born perfect and holy, who always did what was pleasing to God from the first moment of His life to His innocent death on the cross. Because of the saving work of Jesus, God removes our sin and counts us as perfect and holy in His sight—perfect through Jesus' perfection alone.

So we are only beautiful, pleasing **firstfruits** to God, because that is what He has made us, this is the status He given us through the Spirit's gift of faith in Jesus. As His **firstfruits** you are chosen by Him, loved by Him, special to Him, belonging to Him for all eternity!

As a **kind of firstfruits of all he created**, the Lord has given an amazing purpose for your life. You get to live your life dedicated to Him as an expression of thanks and praise for all He's made you, all He's done for you, above all His saving you from the eternal trash-heap of hell to give you a place joyful harvest of never ending life!

Just as the whole basket of **firstfruits** was given in thanks to God, just as the thank offerings we put in the collection plate are entirely given to the Lord, so too our entire life all we do and say is to be lived to God in thanks and praise.

Or as another verse puts it: **Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.** Or yet another: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**

Put this altogether and James is making the same point Paul makes in Ephesians: **It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** And then he

immediately adds: **For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.**

Borrowing expressions from our Lutheran confessions we could say it this way: *We are saved by faith in Christ alone, but saving faith in Christ is never alone.* Faith in Christ's forgiveness is always accompanied with actions lived in thanks for Jesus who did everything to save us.

James gives us some very practical examples of how it looks to **live as God's firstfruits** honoring Him in all we do and say:

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry... Don't just wait for your turn to speak, but in love listen to others. How many misunderstandings and anger could be avoided if instead of jumping to conclusions we heard the other person out in love.

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. Don't give into the

world's values of lust, greed, selfishness, instant gratification and the like, but rely on the Lord's promises for strength and cling to what His Word says is right. .

Keep a tight rein on (the) tongue... Be careful with your words, for they can cause trouble and hurt others deeply. Instead **speak the truth in love** to build others up. And what is true of the spoken word applies every bit as much and more to what we write in social media, since it is even more lasting!

Look after orphans and widows in their distress—help others in need, comfort those in distress, showing love just as the Lord has loved us.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Recognize God means what He says and that He says it *to you*: whether it's the good news of forgiveness in Jesus, the way God teaches us to live, the warning against sin that could draw us away from faith in Christ, or that through God's Word we are equipped to live in thanks for our Savior.

But almost immediately we see a problem! Everything we think, say and do, day after day is not perfectly, wholly, devoted to God like **firstfruits** set before the Lord's altar.

We have not always gladly **listened** to everything God would tell us in His Word nor have we always done everything His word tells us.

How easy it is to speak one way in church, but not **keep a tight rein on the tongue** at work, or out with friends, or watching the big game or when we're tempted to gossip.

It is one thing to listen to the Word teach us about kindness and generosity. But it is not so easy to actually do when helping someone else might cause us an inconvenience in time, money or patience.

How often we see the selfishness that pollutes the world lives within our own old sinful hearts.

So where should we go for help as we strive to live for the Lord who first loved us? Do we just grit our teeth and try harder?

No! You don't get more fruit out of a tree by grabbing the branches and shaking them. Instead you go to the root, you water, you fertilize.

When it comes to the fruits of good works, go back to the roots, go back to what God used to make you His own: **He chose to give us birth through the word of truth... humbly accept the word planted in you.**

Go back to the Word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to water and fertilize our faith. Or as James says: **look intently into** that Word.

So **look intently** at the Word of God. See how it shows us our sin, our falling short of God's glory. It shows us we should be surprised at our failures, given we have a sinful nature within us until the day we die. Not surprised, but also not happy with our sin.

Let the Word of God trouble you as it shows you your sin in all its ugliness, and **do what the word says**: confess your sin to God and flee to God's free forgiveness.

Look intently into God's Word of **truth** and **freedom** show and see how above all it shows us our Savior Jesus in all His love and beauty.

It shows Christ who took your place and mine, who perfectly **listened** to God's Word and perfectly **did** everything it says! It shows you how Jesus chose suffering and death of the hell we deserved to give you the joys of endless life in heaven. It shows you Jesus risen from the dead as the proof He will raise you up to life forever.

Let that Word comfort you as it shows you God's love and forgiveness in Jesus, and then do what the Word says: **whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.**

Look intently into God's Word and let it show you again who you are! Cleansed in the precious blood of Jesus, you are spotless in God's eyes. Baptized into Christ you are clothed with Jesus' perfection,

His forgiven child. You are His new creation through water and the Word, a wonderful **kind of firstfruits** of God's own making who will live with Him in eternal joys, and who by His help is able to live for Him now.

Let that Word remind you exactly who God has made you: one of His own chosen, dearly loved, forgiven people, with a new heart ready to live for the one who first loved us. And do what the Word says and **live as God's firstfruits**. Amen.

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. Amen.