

Living Long in the Land Sermon Series
Sermon 4: Winning at Life
A Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Sunday 11th February 2024
Very Rev Hamish Galloway

Texts:

Exodus 20: 1-19

1 Corinthians 9: 24-27

Matthew 5: 17-20

Introduction

This is the 4th sermon in a series that reflects on the research that shows people who belong to faith communities tend to live good and long lives.

Based on this research, in an article called *The Surprising Connections between Faith and Health*, the writer Rob Moll comments:

“If religious faith could be packaged in a pill, the stock price of drug companies would soar. Religion, not merely spirituality, is a profound predictor of health.”

Based on biblical principles, current research (particularly from the Blue Zone project) and personal experience as a minister with over 40 years’ experience, I have identified 8 factors present in Christian faith communities that contribute to good and long living. So far we have looked at the life-giving impact of Christian community and the power of prayer. Today we will examine ‘lifestyle’, focusing on the moral choices that follow on from Christian commitment.

The book *The Blue Zones – Secrets to Living Longer* states: “The world’s longest living people chose – or were born into – social circles that encourage healthy behaviours....the social circles of long-lived people have favourably shaped their behaviours.” (p230)

And in *The Surprising Connections between Faith and Health* Rob Moll writes about how faith encourages healthy behaviour:

“Don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t chew, and don’t go with girls who do.” Even the fundamentalist Christian high school I attended considered that line outdated. Nevertheless, the effect of behavioural change due to religion literally reduces your chances of dying. Your faith community may not encourage you to eat organic, non-GMO, plant-based, local and slow foods, but it probably still exercises some healthy

influence on the habits you form and the activities you undertake.

I discovered a stark example visiting the work of a Christian microfinance agency in Cambodia. Microfinance aims to help people out of poverty by giving small loans to start small businesses. But the loan client I met, a fisherman, told me that what really helped him was learning discipline through the small group of loan clients he regularly met with. Many of them were Christians, so he became one too. They helped him stop drinking, which ended the damaging home environment for his wife and children. Religion didn't fix his life and help him out of poverty. But through regular exposure to a group with healthier lifestyles and habits, faith created an environment to make that happen in his own life."

And Professor Christian Smith, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame is well known for his research focused on religion, adolescents and emerging adults, and social theory. His research show that young people with Christian faith have lower levels of STD's, involvement in crime and mental health problems. They have higher levels of positive outlook and community service.

Why is that? Lets explore ...

1. Winning at life

The title of this sermon is inspired by a cup I saw this week with this as the slogan printed on it. It struck me because it seemed to align with the lectionary reading for this morning from 1 Corinthians 9, where Paul talks of the Christian life as training for and then running to win the race, and as like a boxer who lands punches rather than simply punching the air.

I think he is saying 'live your best life!' And, certainly, that is surely something we can all aspire to.

One of the keys to winning at life is to know the guidelines and rules, the instructions and maker's manual, and to follow them!

Proverbs 3:1-2 puts it this way:

"My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands;

For length of days and long life and peace they will add to you."

2. The rules for life

The 10 commandments stand out in the history of humanity as the most influential rules for life! Still today there is a strong residual influence in our laws and norms that stem back to these ancient laws, rules, guidelines for good living.

Let's look at both the origins and the health benefits of these rules for life.

(a) Origins

A vital and key element of the biblical passages that give us the 10 commandments (Exodus 20 & Deuteronomy 5) is that they are not from human origins, the result of some kind of corporate think-tank or brainstorm! They originate directly from God in dramatic form ('The people saw thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain smoke' – Exodus 20:18).

The message here is that these rules are a divine law, coming to us by the maker of the universe, the one who first breathed life into the human form. It gives a biblical answer to the question about morality – is it contextual and relative, or is it something that is universal and built into the way the universe is? The answer here is clear, there is a way of living that comes to us from a divine and all-knowing source. There are universal moral principles that provide the template for good, long life. This is affirmed and developed by Jesus. We see in Matthew 5 Jesus affirming these laws:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Matthew 5:17)

Jesus brings depth to the rules for life, expanding our understanding of things like murder and adultery into how our thought patterns in these areas corrupt our hearts and, ultimately, our health. And he helpfully summarised all the rules into the simple saying, 'love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself'. St Augustine went one step further, saying 'love and do what you want!' That is worth thinking about.

(b) The health benefits of these laws?

The first 2 commandments relate to belief in the one God who created heaven and earth.

Michael Carr-Grey, the renowned Australian psychologist, has said that well-being in our young people is closely related to their sense of belonging to 3 things; family, to school and to meaning. I totally

get that, having worked for 21 years as a school chaplain. The answer to the question, is this a random and meaningless universe or a planned and meaningful universe, is a key factor in the well-being of our young and, I would say, people of any age. The Blue Zone identified having the sense of purpose that comes with religious faith as a factor in good and long life. The 10 rules for life start right here, there is a God who is ultimately in charge and who calls us into loving relationship! That is life-giving! It produces the life-giving benefits of hope, purpose and meaning.

Then there is respecting parents – this is interesting because a common characteristic of the Blue Zones was intergenerational connection and elderly folk continuing to live with and contribute to their extended family. There is research that shows that this extends both the quality and quantity of life!

Then there are 4 rules in quick succession that deal with how we treat each other:

- Don't kill
- Don't commit adultery
- Don't steal
- Don't lie.

When I was working as a chaplain, I used to have a great discussion with my year 13 students provoked by this question: “Why be good? What are the benefits of good behaviour? Why not just do what you want, good or bad?”

The end result was the conclusion that being good completely outweighed bad behaviour in terms of benefits, well-being and health. A good example of this is the a hot topic for conversations with teenagers. When working as a school chaplain, I would take the ‘don't commit adultery’ rule to mean be faithful to one long-term life partner. Compared to the physical, emotional, relational and psychological pain and damage that can be caused by casual sex, the benefits of keeping this command become clear. The crowning glory in this conversation was research that found highest sexual satisfaction was in long-term, committed, monogamous relationships, when compared to casual sex or short-term relationships.

The last commandment – do not covet – is a good example of how these rules are tied to health and well-being. Research conducted at

the University of Rochester Medical Centre shows how envy and jealousy add to stress and anger and are closely tied to illnesses like heart disease, compromised immune systems, and some forms of cancer.

3. There is a problem, though!

The 10 commandments are not the only rules in the first 5 books of the bible! There are, in fact, 319 of them! Why? Because of a recurring pattern of the people not keeping the rules! The rules got broken, causing mayhem, which led to more rules being developed! Eventually, there were so many it was a nightmare to keep up with them all. There is a fascinating book called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. The book describes how A J Jacobs spend a year trying to follow all the rules and guidelines he could find in the bible. The end result was chaotic and impossibly complicated!

However, that sets the scene for 2 incredibly important and life-giving add-ons to the biblical rules for life. These add-ons come with the New Testament and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the holy Spirit. They are:

- (a) Forgiveness for failure to keep the rules and the chance to start again.
- (b) The extra help of the Holy spirit in living the good life!

This beautifully rounds out and completes the behavioural benefits of faith, transferring the rules, in the biblical language, from cold, hard rules on stone tablets to a way of life written on the hearts of believers who are in this loving relationship with the creator of the rules!

To quote again from Proverbs 3, this time “the Message version:

“Good friend, don't forget all I've taught you;
Take to heart my commands.
They all help you live a long, long time,
a long life lived full and well.”

Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent is coming up this week. It is a time to evaluate how you are living! Such a good time to think about your lifestyle and how aligned it is to the plan God has for your wellbeing and longevity.