

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 18 (Pentecost 15), Series B
Saturday, September 4th, 2021
Sunday, September 5th, 2021 (Labor Day)

Sermon: Faith Works
Text: James 2:1-10, 14-16

Focus: Good works are the fruit of faith.

Function: That they would do good works of love for their neighbor as joyful response to salvation in Christ alone.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need” (SC, 5th Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. One Sunday, so the story goes, the pastor of a local church preached a passionate sermon about the Biblical doctrine that we cannot earn our salvation or get into heaven by our good works. A visitor looked around at the sleepy, doleful congregation, and recognized some of his grumpy neighbors, dishonest employees from his business, and other people with bad reputations. In dismay, the visitor stood up and asked, “Preacher, why go on harping against good works? It doesn’t look like anyone here is trying to do any.” *[Pause for laughter.]*

This story illustrates the point made by the apostle James (or Jacob), the half-brother of our Lord Jesus: “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Jas. 2:17, ESV).¹ Or, put more succinctly: “faith without works is dead” (v. 26, KJV). “What good is it, my brothers [and sisters], if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (v. 14). For James, the answer is a resounding NO! And, for some of us, that is a very scary accusation.

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Today's epistle lesson from James 2 is one of the most controversial passages in the history of Biblical interpretation. During the Reformation, the Roman Catholic theologians routinely referred to it in their diatribes against Luther and his evangelical theology. In particular, verse 24 seems to favor their viewpoint: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone". The papacy maintained that we are saved by a combination of grace and good works: Do your best, and God will do the rest.

So, out of his own frustration (and misunderstanding) of this letter, Luther derided James as "an epistle of straw." Nevertheless, he recognized it as canon and included it in his German translation of the New Testament. But many Lutherans, ever the champions of the great *solas* of the Reformation—grace alone, faith alone, Word alone, and Christ alone—have an ambiguous relationship with this book. We are justified (saved) by grace alone through faith alone apart from works of the law. This is the article of faith by which the Church stands or falls. In fact, from the very beginning of the Reformation, we have stood so firmly on this teaching that the Catholic theologians wrongly accuse us of being *against* good works! Nothing could be further from the truth.

Lutherans (and some other Protestants) love to quote the apostle Paul, who writes, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28). This seems to be a contradiction to James: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." The statements seem like complete opposites! So how *do* we reconcile Paul and James, and what are we to make of this strange epistle? Are the Catholics right after all, and should we throw out 500 years of Reformation theology? By no means! Here's why.

Paul and James are speaking to different moments in the Christian's life. For Paul, justification occurs at the moment of conversion, when the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts to believe in Jesus as Savior and receive his forgiveness. For James, justification happens *after* conversion when we live *out* our faith. That's because Paul and James employ two different nuances of the verb "to justify" (*dikaioō*). Paul uses the most common definition of "justify," which means to declare someone innocent—to *make* them righteous (or just). James uses a less common meaning of "justify," which means to be *proven* righteous (or just).

The proof of this difference is born out in the very different stories they use about the life of Abraham. In Romans 4, Paul refers to the Abraham's justification by faith that occurred in Genesis 15. There God made wonderful promises to Abraham. "And he [Abra(ha)m] believed the LORD, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). That is, he was declared righteous. He was justified.

James uses a different story: God's command for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac—"his only Son"—in Genesis 22. As strange and wicked as God's demand for human sacrifice might appear, Abraham nevertheless obeyed. Only at the last minute did God stay his hand to keep him from killing Isaac. God didn't really want Isaac to die. God wanted to test Abraham's faith. And Abraham passed the test. That is why God said, "Now I *know* that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen. 22:12). Did you catch that?! "Now I know." That is, God proved Abraham's faithfulness, which is why James can write in Chapter 2: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works" (vv. 22-23).

God himself proves his love for us in a similar—albeit, much greater way: by sending his Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Because Jesus died and rose again, we have the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in his name. St. John picks up on this in *his* epistle and uses Christ’s sacrifice as a model for own service to our neighbors:

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 4:16-18).

Christ’s work and accomplishment of our salvation on the cross inevitably leads to our works of love for other people.

If a parent never cuddled, fed, clothed, or played with a child, could they really claim to love him or her? No. If children always were to talk back to their parents, refuse to obey them, and curse them publicly, could those children really claim to love their parents? No, of course not. And if you were to tell your spouse that you love him or her, but never hugged and kissed them, never helped them around the house, and never spoke a kind word, would they really believe your love? Absolutely *not*!

So it is with God. Faith without works is dead. Our works of love are the demonstration of our faith in God. Christ himself declares, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). And in the Sermon on the Mount, he says: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Keeping God’s Ten Commandments and obeying his Law are the ways we

prove our love for him. Doing good works that benefit our neighbor is how we pay forward the gifts that God first gave to us.

In his Romans commentary, Luther famously wrote:

“Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises; it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them.”²

Wow! This is a powerful statement. Luther asserts that a Christian cannot help but to do good works—they flow freely from the heart of one who has been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. A Christian can’t *not* do good works. Not only are good works the fruit and evidence of Christian faith, but they also are the natural consequence *of* faith.

That is the same thing James says in his challenge: “Show me your faith *apart* from your works, and I will show you my faith *by* my works” (Jas. 2:18). Of course, you cannot prove your faith without works. Nobody—besides God—can see into your heart. Works of love for God and neighbor are the only outward evidence of faith. That’s why James provides the illustration of wishing someone well but sending them away without proper food or clothing. “What good is that?” he asks (v. 16). Obviously, no good at all. We know that instinctively. Faith without works is dead. Why? Because faith *works*.

James 2 tells us what we already know: that faith works. I mean that as a double entendre. Faith works because faith is the only thing that saves us from sin, death, and hell. But faith also works because it immediately goes into action to love and serve God and other people. Faith works. I think that’s also a better title for Article IV of the Formula of Concord, “On Good Works.” There the Lutheran theologians of the generation after Luther died dealt with the

² Martin Luther, Introduction, *Commentary on Romans* (1552), trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954; reprint, Kregel Publications, 1976), xvii.

Majorist controversy concerning good works. George Major wrongly asserted that “Good works are necessary for salvation,” thereby violating the teaching of St. Paul that we are justified only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In response to Major, Nicholas Amsdorf set forth that good works are actually “harmful” to salvation, thus violating the teaching of St. James that faith without works is dead. Here is the Lutheran paradox on good works: good works are *not* necessary for salvation; but good works *are* necessary.

Paul and James are not opposed. They’re in concert with one another. The Christian life is not a matter of faith or works. Faith and works belong together. Faith works. Just don’t be the cart before the horse. The horse is faith, which leads the way into heaven. The cart is our good works, which follow behind. Of the blessed dead gone to be with the Lord, the Bible says, “their deeds follow them!” (Rev. 14:13). Their deeds *follow* them. Our good works don’t get us into heaven. But our good works get into heaven. That is the paradox.

Faith works, but this teaching can be pushed too far. We do not want to set up ourselves as judges weighing in on the performance of others to determine whether or not they are true Christians. Only God searches the hearts and minds of all people (Rev. 2:23). Furthermore, we cannot say that because of any one particular sin or sins, somebody obviously does *not* have faith. We are *simul iustus et peccator*—“simultaneously righteous and a sinner.” And as forgiven sinner-saints, we will struggle against the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature until the day we die or the Day Jesus returns—whichever happens first. Jesus says, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (Matt. 7:1-2). Leave the judgment to God.

Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification. On Judgment Day, he will look at our rap sheet and find no charges against us because all our sins are washed away in the blood of Jesus. But he will see the good deeds—the works of love—we carried out in faith in service to God and neighbor. And for these, he will commend us: “Well done, good and faithful servant.... Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21, 23). How can this be? Because faith *works*. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.