

Sermon for September 20, 2015 – Pentecost 17

James 2:14-26

Theme: Faith without works is dead!

- 1) *Worthless is the faith that doesn't act (14-20)*
- 2) *Priceless is the faith that does act (21-26)*

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and shudder. ²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Picture three plants in front of you: one is covered with beautiful green leaves and brightly colored flowers; the next has a few green leaves but also quite a few brown branches; and the last one is all shriveled up and dry. What assessment would you make concerning these three plants? The first one is very much alive and well. The second is sick and needs immediate attention. The third plant is dead and should probably be composted.

Christians can be compared to these plants. There are three types: There are those who are alive and active in their faith. Like a healthy tree, they naturally produce an abundance of spiritual fruit. Then there are those Christians who, by their fruit, you can tell are struggling in their faith. They need special, Gospel care and attention to strengthen them. Then there are those Christians who produce no spiritual fruit at all. Their faith is withered and dead.

The fruits of faith are good works. No, good works don't make a person a Christian any more than colorful flower petals and green leaves produce a cherry tree. However, just as a cherry tree will naturally produce beautiful flower petals and leaves in the spring, so also a believing Christian will produce the fruit of good works.

With the epistle writer James as our guide, let us learn about the importance of good works - from where they come and what they reveal about our faith - under the theme: **Faith without works is dead!** 1) *Worthless is the faith that doesn't act.* 2) *Priceless is the faith that does act.*

Part One: Worthless is the faith that doesn't act (14-20)

Many people say they have faith in God - even when their lives are at variance with their claim. They might say: "Just because I never go to church, doesn't mean that I don't believe in Jesus. I pray to him all the time." You might also hear someone say: "God is love. He accepts me as I am; unlike you people who seem to be constantly judging my lifestyle."

Yes, the "God is love so no one can tell me what to do" type of Christianity is very popular today - not only outside these Church walls, but, even within them. Even within this body of mine, the devil and my sinful flesh work hard at tempting me to "pick and choose" what to believe and how to act rather than simply believing all of God's Word and doing what it says.

This is why James asks the important question: *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*

Now, good Lutherans that we are, we all know the Bible passage that says: *it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* (Eph 2:8-9 NIV84). The Bible is crystal clear on this point: no one is declared righteous by observing the law. Our deeds and works can never save us. And why not? Because even our best works are tainted with sin. The law is not a way to earn our salvation, but a means by which our sins are revealed to us. For what purpose? So that we might see our inability to save ourselves and look to Jesus alone for our salvation.

Jesus has saved us. When He died on the cross, he died for the sins of the whole world - paying for them in full. The only reason you and I can go to heaven is because of this fact. And the only way we receive the benefit of Christ's sacrifice is through faith alone, and not by works, as the Scriptures say: *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.* (Rom 3:28 NIV84)

There you have it: faith alone saves. But here is something else to consider: faith is never alone - it is always accompanied by works. Why? Because, as the Scriptures say, God saved us for a purpose: that we might, as his dearly loved children, be *eager to do what is good.* (cf. Tit 2:14 NIV84). St. Paul says so much, when He writes: *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* (Eph 2:10 NIV84)

So this leads back to the question: *if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*

Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. Think of it this way: have you ever seen the wind? I haven't. But I can perceive the effects of the wind by observing the rustling leaves and bending branches. Now imagine someone said to you that it is very windy outside, but as you look at the window, not a single leaf is moving. Is what he says true? No.

And neither is it true when someone says: "I have faith," (something I can't see) but the effects of his faith (his deeds, which I can perceive) are utterly absent.

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Mere words, if they are not followed up with action, are just that: mere words. It doesn't matter how much we say we love somebody; if we don't follow it up with our actions, we show that love is absent from our heart.

And this is what hypocrisy is all about: claiming to feel something we don't, or to be someone we aren't. Christianity is not merely a matter of words, but a matter of the heart. The faith God has planted in our hearts through the Gospel changes us. We have been given a new spirit - one that desires to love as Christ has loved us. It is only natural for the Christian to want to show love to God and his neighbor. And if a person refuses to show such love? Well, listen to what another apostle wrote about that: *If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.* (1Jo 4:20 NIV84)

St. James continues: *But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."*

Having addressed those people who claim to have "faith" and yet do not show it in their actions, James now addresses those who claim that their actions will save them even though they have no faith.

You hear this kind of religion all the time - especially at funerals. People say: "So and so was such a good person, they deserve to be in heaven" - even though that person didn't actually express any sort of faith in Jesus whatsoever. Such a theology makes "salvation" a byproduct of "good works".

But salvation is definitely not the result of living a good life. Salvation comes by faith alone: a God-given faith that will naturally express itself through what it does. This is why St. James says: *Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.*

Neither faith without deeds nor deeds without faith are pleasing to God. Just as a plant produces a flower and not the other way around, so also the only works that please God proceed from a heart that believes in Him, as the Scriptures says: *"without faith it is impossible to please God,* (Hebrews 11:6 NIV84)" and again, *"everything that does not come from faith is sin."* (Romans 14:23 NIV84)

St. James continues: *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and shudder.*

The point is clear: merely believing that "god" exists doesn't save a person either. The only faith that saves is faith that is placed in Christ. Such a faith will lead us to recognize who the true God is and what he demands in His law. It will lead us to see our sins and cry out for mercy, repenting of them all! Such a faith will trust God's promise that He forgives us for Christ sake - that all our

sins have been paid for in full through his sacrifice on the cross. We are at peace with God. And in the peace of this salvation - having been declared free and forgiven of all sin - we will naturally want to live to God's glory - showing forth faith and love for him in all our actions.

Part Two: Priceless is the faith that does act.

And so, St. James continues: *You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.*

Abraham is an excellent example both of how faith alone saves, and how faith is never alone. The Scriptures are clear: *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.* Faith in God's promise of a Savior alone saved Abraham's soul.

The LORD was Abraham's God. Abraham trusted in all of God's promises. How do we know that Abraham had such a faith in the LORD? His willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God's command proves it - so much so that the LORD himself had to prevent Abraham from going through with the deed, saying: *"Do not lay a hand on the boy . . . Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."* (Gen 22:12 NIV84).

From this example St. James deduces: *You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*

Don't miss understand this verse to mean: Abraham's actions saved him by earning favor with God. The Scriptures never say that! No, what this verse means, rather, is that Abraham's actions "justified" him in the sense that this willingness to sacrifice his son publicly revealed that his faith was genuine, and not fake.

In this same way our deeds "justify" us before the world: they are the evidence of whether or not our faith is genuine or fake, of whether or not the LORD truly is our God whom we fear, love and trust above all things.

James quotes another example: *In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?* When the spies that Joshua sent to Jericho were discovered, Rahab hid and saved them. Why? Because she heard the reports about how the LORD led Israel through the wilderness, and why they had come. She believed that God would do for Israel everything He said He would do, and this faith compelled her to act - trusting that the LORD would show her mercy. Rahab's faith saved her by exhibiting itself in what she did.

And so, St James concludes: *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you now understand the importance of both faith and works? Faith alone saves, but genuine faith is never alone. Just as, in the fall, an apple tree will produce apples, so also the Christian who is declared righteous by faith will show forth fruits of righteousness in his life as He prayerfully lives to the glory of His heavenly Father, who adopted him into His family.

No, we will never be perfect in this life, but we are forgiven through faith in Christ's work for us. In the peace of this forgiveness, therefore, let us strive to please our heavenly father - letting our faith shine forth in this dark world through our actions so that people "*may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*" (Mat 5:16 NIV84). It is for this noble purpose that we have been saved: that our faith-driven acts might glorify God by witnessing Christ's saving love to the world. Amen.