

September 8, 2024

James 2:8-17

“Good Works: The Fruit of Faith!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

James asks: “What good is it if someone claims to have faith but does not have deeds? Can that faith save him?” What James is driving at by asking these questions is this: faith without deeds is dead. Our Lutheran Confessions quote Luther in his preface to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans:

Faith ... is a divine work in us that changes us and makes us to be born anew of God (John 1:12-13). It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; it brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them.

Perhaps we can put it in another way. One author writes that “As we live in Christ and His righteousness through faith, our faith is just naturally and spontaneously fruitful in works of loving service. It is what faith does.” The same author goes on to tell a story to make it more vivid. He writes of little Suzie who fell down and skinned her knees. Her loving mother picked her up, comforted her, and tended to her wounds. Now should we be so silly as to ask the mother: why did you do this? Or, can you imagine asking: did you think that you had to do this? For the one who cares for her child there is no sense of calculation or duty. Most mothers just love their child and care.

When I talk about the Christian life and our good works I like to use 1 John 4:19, where the apostle writes: “We love because he first loved us.” It’s as simple as that. We love as Jesus loved us on the cross, that is, we willingly sacrifice ourselves for others because we have received the greatest sacrifice in the forgiveness of sins. I also like to refer to Jesus’ words in the gospel of John, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing (15:5).” Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. Being connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus in the gospel and sacraments causes us to bear the fruit of good deeds.

Now, every good work conforms to the law of God. Also, every good work must proceed from the proper motive. That means that they should not be done because they are commanded, or because you are afraid of being punished, or because of a desire for reward. Uh oh. Now we are in trouble. And James goes on to quote the royal law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And, if you are doing this, you are doing well. Now we are getting into more trouble. James then goes on to say, “But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” Who among us has never harbored favoritism in the heart? Things are getting worse. We could go on with this but you’re probably getting the picture. We would like to have wonderfully, pure good works, but we see that even as Christians we still have filthy desires and motives in us that taint our good deeds.

Luther once said: “A pious Christian sins in all his good works.” So, as Christian people, how do we deal with this reality in us? First we confess our filthy desires and motives for what they are, and look to Christ. We begin to realize that, for any good deed to be counted as a good deed, even in the Christian,

it must be cleansed by Jesus Christ and his good works. It is here that we may say that for Christ's sake, even our imperfect or tainted good deeds are only acceptable because the sin that is in them is forgiven. The Lutheran Confessions instruct us in this way: "Although in this life the good works of believers are imperfect and impure because of sin in the flesh, nevertheless they are acceptable and well pleasing to God. However, the Law does not teach how and why the good works of believers are acceptable ... But the Gospel teaches that our spiritual offerings are acceptable to God through faith for Christ's sake."

The Gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ is an astounding thing to consider. Faith in the love of God for the forgiveness of sins not only produces the desire to do good works, but the cross of Jesus even covers the filth that remains in us when we do good works. Thus, the good works that we do are only good for the sake of Christ. Moreover, the good works that we do are not from ourselves, but they are the works that Jesus has done in and through us, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, "we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." One thing is for certain, there are no good works that we may offer to save ourselves, for the good we do comes from outside of ourselves. We are not saved by our good works, for our good works flow from the good works of Jesus.

Therefore, good works are not necessary for our justification and salvation. As Paul writes in Romans 3:28, "... we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." No one goes to heaven on the basis of their good works. When God justifies a person, it is based solely on the good works of Jesus. Nor do our good works supplement any deficit or deficiency in the good works of our Savior, for it says in Hebrews 10:14, "... by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." And we should not think for a moment that our good works are going to give our faith saving power or preserve faith in our hearts. No! These things are done by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of forgiveness in the cross of Jesus and the empty tomb. But a faith without deeds is dead.

My teacher when I went to school at Concordia writes: "To live in Christ is simply to bring forth the works of Christ. He created and redeemed us from sin to love. It is not a matter of legal compulsion or coercion, as if works of love were something foreign to our recreated nature. The grace by which we live and grow in Christ is the grace that empowers and engenders fruitful faith. Works of love are how faith expresses itself in daily living." It is the freedom of the gospel - the forgiveness of sins - that motivates deeds. But as much as we hate to admit it, the vocational life we live as saints and sinners makes it impossible for us to sort out our motivations. We are a mess.

The author of *Dying to Live* writes, "We find resentment and joy, rebellion and love hopelessly intertwined in our hearts. Therefore as we have only one hope for justification, so we have only one hope for sanctification." The forgiveness of sins and abiding in Christ is not just our initiation into the Christian life. It is our daily life. In the everyday things, that we do as Christians, we live outside of ourselves - in Christ by faith in his forgiveness and in the neighbor by love. Works of the Christian that serve Christ through the neighbor only spring from true saving faith in Jesus alone. As Paul writes in Romans 14:23, "... everything that does not come from faith is sin." So, we believe that we are producing good works only through faith in the gospel - from the impact of Christ's love for us in the forgiveness of sins. This is even the case when we see the sin of favoritism in us, or any other sin for that matter.

So, what do we do when we read these warnings from James and are exposed to the ongoing struggle within us that taints every good work we do? We confess our sins and remain in Jesus through the gospel and sacraments. In other words, we remain in the vine of our Savior Jesus Christ. Our ongoing death to sin, and being raised to newness of life in the gospel and sacraments, makes all the difference. This is what James means in our lesson when he says: “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” In a Lutheran commentary on this passage in James we read the following:

James reminds them [us] that, having been freed from the condemnation of sin, including the sin of partiality, they have been freed for a life of speaking and doing according to the reality in Christ that will soon be consummated at his return and which they already have in part. Indeed, for the “saint” within them (as opposed to the “sinner” that still hangs on), this speaking and acting describes who they are in Christ. “The Law of freedom” has assured them of a blessed judgment. James exhorts them to live in that freedom.

Indeed! **Good Works: The Fruit of Faith!** The practice of good works lies with faith in the freedom of the gospel of Jesus - the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven. No wonder why it is so important that we continue in our baptismal identity - dying to sin and walking in newness of life. The daily living of our justification will increase the fruit in our ordinary Christian life. It is the power of the pardon in Christ that frees us from ourselves to live a life for others. God uses his Law to reveal our sin and to instruct us what good works are, but it is the gospel of pardon for sins that causes us to bear fruit. And it is for the sake of Jesus that our filthy desires and motives that are tangled with our good deeds are overlooked. That truly is an amazing pardon.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

Koehler, Edward W. A. *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teaching of the Bible*. 1952.
Ritchie, Rick, and Steven A. Hein. *The Christian Life: Cross or Glory?* New Reformation Publications, 2021.
Senkbeil, Harold L. *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*. 1994.
Giese, Curtis P. *James*. 2021.