

## Written Copy: James 2:14-17 “Is it Works or Faith?”

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday @ Pentecost – Proper 18

Sunday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021

### Text: James 2:14-17

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? <sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

### The text's intent

Demonstrate the necessity of good works in those who have an active saving faith in Christ. Their good works are not the source of faith, or the reason they are in right standing and thus saved from sin, death, and the devil. But the works they do are declared to be good because they are propagated and directed by faith. Without any desire or effort to do good works a person's faith is not in Christ, it is a "dead" faith unable to save them.

### Focus Statement:

God loves me not because of what I do, but because of who He is as the source of unconditional love. My salvation is accomplished only through Jesus' work of atonement on my behalf, being the sacrifice for my sins as shown in His death and resurrection. He accomplished all that needs to be done and I can add nothing to it. He implanted that faith in my heart in baptism and keeps it alive through the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit, who is the source and instigator for the good works Christ desires me to do as a member of His Church.

### Function Statement:

#### Why it's important to know:

When it comes to our living out the balance between faith and works we can err on one of two sides: either we emphasize our works so much that we let them replace faith as the reason for our right standing with God. This appeals to my sinful heart's desire to earn favor with God, or even salvation through my works. The other side is that we see faith as being alone, with no imperative or necessity for accompanying works since we are "saved by grace alone". This appeals to the desire of our sinful heart to work for my good at the expense of others.

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

Understand that my works do not earn me any credit with God, nor do they accomplish or add to my salvation. But Jesus saved me and placed me in His Church to do them. His Spirit points out those He brings me into contact with, those around me whom He wants me to help with my time, talents, and treasures. I need to watch out for the reluctance of my sinful heart that wants to focus on me and not sacrificially love others through works.

### Subject Sentence: God gift of faith in my life produces good works

## **Cindy: Centered on Good Works**

Meet Cindy. Cindy has been a member of a Lutheran Church most of her life. She has moved around from congregation to congregation seeking just the right fit, which by her definition is one that is active in mission work outside the Church walls. She served as head of the Evangelism Committee, and as such opened the doors for that congregation to be involved in numerous outreach focused organizations and events in the inner-city area where they were located. She was always at work on others trying to create in them the same drive to reach out and do good works for those in need.

Her drive for mission work moved her to expand the Evangelism Committee's focus to partner with more and more non-profit groups. At the same time she expected more and more people to commit more and more of their time, talents, and treasures. She thought that the fire and zeal that she had for works of charity was the best way to please Jesus. She was saddened that many of the other members of her congregation didn't share her drive and zeal. As she watched the same group of people show up for each new activity, she quietly wondered to herself "Those who never come to serve, what's wrong with their relationship with Jesus?"

As time went by, she became dissatisfied with the work being done at the local soup kitchen, food pantry, and clothes closet. They didn't seem to be making a real impact on the problems her city was facing. She thought that she and her congregation, with her in the lead, could do a much better job and have a greater impact if they started their own soup kitchen, food pantry, and Evangelism station instead of supporting the existing ones. She went before the Church Council and asked them to support either setting aside space at the Church, or present to the congregation a building fund to raise money to buy a nearby vacant building to convert into the Church's own Mercy Center Evangelism Station, complete with soup kitchen, clothes closet, and community cupboard. The Church Council rejected her proposal, instead opting to become more involved in the local charities that were already doing those things.

Undeterred by this, she and a few members of her Evangelism Committee pooled their money together, applied and received some grant money, took out some loans, and went ahead with starting their own Mercy Evangelism Center in the vacant building she had her eye on. She felt sure that this would have Jesus' blessing, and He would grow in His love and blessings for them. She had been listening to a popular TV Evangelist who believed that the optimum time to go out and evangelize was on Sunday mornings, when most Churches were worshipping. That way, those you were likely to run into would be the unchurched unbelievers. So that is how they spent their Sunday mornings, reaching out to people and inviting them to come and help make their town a better place. They would gather for a short devotion, usually drawn from this TV Evangelist's book, say a short prayer asking Jesus to bless their venture, then head out into the community. As the TV Evangelist said,

faith must be active, not sitting on your hands for an hour in an old-fashioned antiquated worship service.

They had some initial success. They were able to reach out to a number of unchurched people who wanted to be involved in making their city a better place. She did notice that a good number of them skipped the opening devotional time and simply came for the outreach portion, or just showed up for a shift at the Mercy Center then left. While this troubled her initially, she passed it off as not being that important. The mission was important. And believed Jesus loved them too because of their works.

But gradually these outside volunteers stopped showing up. And then her friends from the Church Evangelism Committee began to fade away too. They would make excuses such as “This is a busy time right now. When things slow down and lighten up, perhaps we will be able to come back and help again.” And she herself was becoming disillusioned with it all. The funding dried up. She was seeing more need than they had resources for. And instead of making a difference in the community she felt that nothing had really changed. She felt drained: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. She wondered why Jesus had let them down; why He had let her down.

### **Kathy: Works are not Important to Faith**

While many at the Church were saddened with Cindy’s departure, Kathy was not one of them. She was a longtime member of the Lutheran Church that they both attended. She didn’t appreciate Cindy’s pushy attitude, nor her fixation on outreach and good works. Kathy thought it fine if Cindy wanted to do those kinds of things. Perhaps the Lord had gifted her with gifts to do such work. But Kathy felt the Lord had not gifted everybody with those gifts. Reaching out with the Gospel to the unchurched was a job for the Pastor, and for those who had a heart for that kind of thing. But she was not one of them.

After all it wasn’t like she didn’t do anything. She gave her tithe regularly to the Church, knowing that some of those funds went toward missions. She also gave a special offering every year to the Lutheran Hour to support their ministry in reaching the lost. And that was good enough to cover it she felt.

And further, she reasoned, it’s not like works are mandatory for salvation. Whenever she heard of other members getting involved with mission, and she began to feel the tinge of guilt for not joining them, she remembered her Confirmation verses: **Ephesians 2:8-9** **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** She considered Cindy as one of those who had fallen away from the true Gospel into works righteousness: trying to gain right standing with Jesus through one’s work instead of letting faith do the talking. As she was fond of saying, “Jesus did it all on the cross, there is nothing that I have to do, or anything He expects me to do. It’s all been done already. I just come here to receive His gifts

and go home to bask in the glory of it all. I'm a baptized child of God. What do I need to worry about?

Kathy not only struggled when noticing others involvement in missions, she struggled whenever it came time in the Church year, every three years, for James Chapter 2 to be the appointed Epistle Lesson. One verse in particular caused her anxiety: **James 2:24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.** In her mind that violates everything the Gospel stands for, and stood in direct confrontation with Paul's focus on grace and faith. She remembered hearing that even Luther struggled with the book of James, calling it the "Straw Gospel" because it seemingly neglected "by grace through faith". This year was the year for the book of James to appear in the appointed readings. And it was coming up in a couple weeks. And apparently her Pastor intended on preaching on it. So she decided to sit down with him and talk about it.

### **Pastor Explains How Paul and James Belong Together**

When she sat down with him, she explained her struggle with "those in the congregation" who push for works as a way to be right with God. She shared with him how it was hard for her to stand James Chapter 2 alongside Paul's Ephesians 2:8-9. She mentioned how a previous pastor at that Church would avoid reading from chapter 2, because he didn't feel it was an appropriate Epistle Lesson, with Luther's seeming disdain for it.

The Pastor replied, "I understand your struggle with James Chapter 2. I struggled once upon a time as well. But let's expand our view to include **Ephesians 2:8-10** <sup>8</sup> **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,** <sup>9</sup> **not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** <sup>10</sup> **For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.** Here we have the law clearly stating that our works, those things we say and do, cannot save us. Instead, our salvation comes as the free gift of grace, which is the power of faith, which is all God's doing and nothing that you or I could ever do. What does that faith make us to be? The workmanship of Christ Jesus. By His death and resurrection, He has re-worked us from the sinful disobedient people that we naturally are outside of faith in Him. He changed you and I in baptism, giving us a new heart that is focused not on pleasing ourselves, but serving Him with our lives. Here we have grace that does something in us. It recreates us to do good works. Which works are those? The ones that God planned for us to do from the beginning, the works that He saved us and left us here on earth to do. The works that He called you and I to join together as a part of His Church, using our combined gifts and talents, all which come from Him as the gift of grace."

“Perhaps”, Pastor said, “Luther was not so opposed to this idea as you might think. He once wrote *“Faith is a divine work in us and makes to be born anew of God. It kills the Old Adam and makes us altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and all powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly...Thus, it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.”* (Luther’s Works 35:370-371). This matches James Holy Spirit inspired word in **James 2:17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”**

“So how should we regard this, Kathy?” Pastor asked. “It is faith alone that saves us from eternal death, giving us the power to trust completely in Jesus’ work on the cross and the empty tomb as being all that we need in granting us forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. But faith is never alone when it resides in us. It naturally shows itself in selfless acts of mercy toward one another. If you have a faith that never moves you to act in love and mercy toward others, then that faith is misplaced, it’s not faith that rests in Christ alone. The living and active faith that holds fast to Jesus cannot help but be producing works.” Kathy left his office telling him she had much to think about before his upcoming sermon on James Chapter 2.

### **Pastor Counsels Cindy**

Not too long after this, Pastor ran into Cindy at the grocery store, and asked her how she was doing. She confided in him that she was really depressed. He talked her into meeting him for coffee. When they met, she told him how things had gone from great to a bust with her Mercy Center. She said, “I thought we were doing the work that Jesus wanted us to do as Christians. But there was more need than we could handle. I feel like Jesus, along with everybody else, abandoned me.”

Pastor responded, “Perhaps what you thought was Jesus’ work, and what He actually had called you to do were two different things. He does call us to do good works of love and mercy. But that’s not the only thing He calls us to do. He first and foremost calls us to be in a faith relationship with Him” Cindy replied, “I thought I was.” Pastor said, “Jesus is always reaching out to you, but when you stopped coming to worship and receiving the gifts that He has to give you to build you up and keep your faith strong, you left Him behind. Good works certainly are important, but they are not truly good and God pleasing without faith. You, yourself, are not truly good and pleasing to God without faith, no matter how many good works you do.”

“As James tells us faith and good works go hand in hand. **James 2:21-22** <sup>21</sup> **Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?** <sup>22</sup> **You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;** Another way to look at this verse, Cindy, is to say that Abraham’s faith was shown and proved to be living and active in his willingness to offer up his only son Isaac, believing that even if Isaac was to die, the LORD would somehow fulfill his promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations, and that all nations would be blessed through his offspring. Abraham’s faith was working in cooperation with the work God had instructed him to do, so that his faith was shown to be complete, trusting in the LORD alone. When you separated yourself from God’s gracious and merciful gifts that come to us in the Word and Sacrament, you separated yourself from the power that creates and sustains good works in us, which is the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace.

## **Conclusion**

Cindy and Kathy are based on real life people that I have known in other congregations in other places. Their names have been changed to protect the innocent. Perhaps something about their viewpoints speaks to you. I confess that each of their viewpoints have spoken to me at one time in my Christian walk or another. The words attributed to the Pastor are words the Holy Spirit has impressed upon me as I’ve thought about these things and the message the Spirit has for me in James Chapter 2. As we live out our life as Christians, sometimes understanding this balance between faith and works can be difficult.

I read a story recently about someone who was given an Alaskan Husky dog that had been trained to be an Olympic Sled Dog. It was older, and while it had been trained to always be on the go, the new owner was sure this would no longer be an issue. The new owner was wrong! This dog was always restless. It would bark to go outside, then bark to go back in, only to go out again. It would dig huge holes in the backyard, it seemed almost all the way to China. And when the new owner would take it for a walk, the dog would almost pull his shoulder out of its socket. It just wanted to go, go GO!!!! The dog was used to being on the move, doing something, pulling something, accomplishing something. And that’s a lot like how our faith should be. A restless thing. Always wanting to be serving our Lord, not in order to earn salvation, but in repentant joy of the salvation that has already been given.

The Holy Spirit is at work to create in each of us that desire to be on the go, serving as His Church in the world. While we sometimes fight that desire, the Spirit moves us to repent and get back at it. We will never respond perfectly to this call to serve this side of eternity. But Christ promises He will continue to work in us. And He will bring us to complete perfection on the Last Day. Amen