

Written Copy: James 2:14-18 "What Good are Good Works?"

Proper 18: 16th Sunday @ Pentecost

Sunday, September 8th, 2024

Text: James 2:14-18

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

Exegetical Statement

James preaches to believers that good works are commanded by God to be a part of our life lived in this world. These works are not to be only for those who can do something for us, for those we like, but especially for those who are unable or unwilling to help us in return. When we play favorites according to who a person is in the world, we are sinning against the Lord, who commands we love our neighbor sacrificially and unconditionally, just as we love ourselves. And as Jesus taught, our neighbor is whomever around us is in need of our help, even and especially those we consider our enemy. Furthermore, if we think that our good works can save us, or give us right standing with the Lord, James points out that even one work of love missed by us condemns any credit we might've received from good works done. Those who claim to have faith in Jesus, but continually refuse to do good works do not have a living saving faith. A supposed faith without any good works is a dead faith. We are called to exhibit our faith as a witness to the world, and we do that with works that match our witness to Christ.

Focus Statement:

Jesus is the only person who truly did works that are declared good and in right standing with the Father. His greatest good work was to become our atoning sacrifice to take away and forgive all our evil works and those that are tainted by our sinful selfish heart. He even forgives those works that are tainted with selfish motives. He earned right standing with the Father and gives that to us by faith. His good works and right standing which are a part of our faith relationship with Him are what earns for us life with Him now and eternal life with Him.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We are commanded to do good works, Yet many times we refuse to do them because our hearts are sinful and selfish, and we miss opportunities because we are too focused on ourselves. And with sinful selfish hearts even the works we do are tainted with sin. Even if we could do a perfect good work, all those times we refuse condemn us.

What the hearer should do as a result:

We are to do good works, not to be saved, or earn favor with God, but because we are saved and have favor with Him through faith in Christ. We are called to do the work of confessing our lack of good works and repent-turn back to serving Him through works as our witness. We do this not to be saved, but because we are saved. Confession and repentance is the Holy Spirit's work in us that we also do to keep us focused on Christ in that faith relationship He has called us into.

Subject Sentence: Our Good Works are driven and empowered by Christ

Introduction

There was once a gentleman named Steve. He was a successful businessman, head of a mid-sized corporation. He wasn't exactly rich, but he considered himself to be 'well-off'. He believed there was a God, but most days didn't give a lot of thought about who He was, or the relationship he had, or should have with Him. Life was just too busy for Church, or Bible Study, or prayer. But he did believe there was a higher power that was keeping watch over things, and over him as well. And he was sure that this higher power subscribed to the dictum: "Bad things happen to bad people, while good things happen to good people." He considered himself to be one of the good people, and he wanted to make sure he stayed in the good graces of God. So, he set aside time every weekend to help out at the local soup kitchen. Not only did he give of his time, but he also contributed a sizeable donation to support it. He loved hearing the "thank- you's" and "Atta boy's" directed at him by the soup kitchen staff as well as other acquaintances who knew of his involvement. And he really loved seeing his name listed as one of the top donors of the mission. These were his main reasons for serving every weekend.

There was also a lady named Cindy. Cindy was a member of a local Church. She prided herself in her attendance every Sunday in worship and weekly in Bible Study. She also was involved every time the Church put on a dinner or sent food down to the local mission. She cooked and helped out with set up and tear down. She prided herself on her involvement and looked down on other members who, in her opinion, didn't do as much as her. She was sure the Lord loved her more than them. In fact, she believed the Lord was very disappointed in them. She was sure that on Judgment Day the Lord would praise all her hard work and tell her that she earned a special place in eternal life.

And there was a gentleman named Jim. Jim was great at building things and fixing things. Give him some wood and he could make just about anything. And when an appliance when on the fritz or something broke at Church he would come and fix it. He loved doing these things for his friends. But he wasn't too fond of giving away his time or talents to those outside his social circle. He figured there were too many looking for a handout and just not deserving of his time. Besides, why help out someone who is not in the position to return the favor to him? His motto of life was "God loves those who help themselves." So, he was sure God loved him and he was set for eternity. And others? Not so much.

All three of these individuals suddenly met the end of life on this earth. And on the Last Day all three found themselves gathered before the Throne of Judgement. And it was there that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ, was separating those standing before Him, placing some on His right side and others on His left. Steve, Cindy, and Jim, all found themselves placed on the left hand of Jesus. And all three were shocked at what they heard Him say. **Matthew 25:41-43** ⁴¹ **“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”**

There was no time or opportunity for them to respond. But if there had been, each would have expressed their surprise, their disdain, their shock over this harsh judgement. After all, each could site in their mind plenty of times they did good works for others. As they looked over at those gathered on Jesus’ right hand, they were each certain they had done far more than those whom they knew gathered there.

Good Works Do Not Save Us

How about you? Are you surprised at where Steve, Cindy, and Jim ended up? Perhaps you know someone who is like these individuals, either in part or in whole. Maybe it’s enough to make you wonder, “If they can’t be saved, then who can?”

In our Epistle Lesson James is laying down the law to the Christian Church. **James 2:14-17** ¹⁴ **What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.** The truth of the matter is, as a believer in Christ, good works are commanded of you. This is not a suggestion; this is a command.

Perhaps we should begin by defining what a “good work” is in the eyes of our God. That’s because He has a different definition than many of us do. Some see a good work as anything done to benefit other people. These can be things that we like to do, have time for, do for friends of ours who we know will return the favor. Often, these kind of works don’t cost us too much in regard to time, talents, and treasures. Yet, these are works that we are supposed to do.

But when it comes to how God defines “a **good** work”, that’s a different story. Good works are those things we do that do not benefit ourselves, but we do for the benefit of others. They are done not just for those we know or like, but they are done for those we don’t know, or may not like. They’re done for those who cannot, and even will not return the favor. And often they cost us some kind of sacrifice of our time, our talents, and our treasures.

And another important factor is our heart attitude when we are doing them. Even though good works are commanded, we are to do them not with a reluctant unwilling heart, but with a heart filled with love for those around us who are much loved by Jesus, just as we are. And Jesus loves all people, even those who are unloving toward us. He loves even those we may consider undeserving. James tells us that our good works should fulfill **(James 2:8) the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”** Here James is quoting Jesus Himself. And even further Jesus tells us in **John 13:34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.** And who is our neighbor that we are to love? Jesus defines that in His Parable of the Good Samaritan where a Samaritan, who would normally consider a Jew to be his enemy, yet when the Jew is in trouble and left for dead, the Samaritan comes to his aid and sacrificially cares for him just as he would desire the Jew to care for him if the situation were reversed.

Here is the honest truth about us as Christians and good works. They are commanded of us. Yet, like all the other commandments of God we do not always do them. We don't do enough of them, nor do we do them with a heart that would ever earn us any favor before Him. That's because each of us still have that sinful selfish heart, the kind that Jesus described last Sunday in our Gospel Lesson as the source of sinful thoughts, words, and actions. Because that heart is still active within us, we are incapable of doing the kind of works that would ever win us favor with God or earn for us life with Him now and eternal life to come.

Even if we could do works that come from a totally unselfish heart, done not for our own benefit but for the glory of God and love for our fellow man, we could never do enough of them. For each time we did a good work, how many other times did we refuse to help someone else because we were too tired, too busy, or just didn't want to? How many times have we been so engrossed with our own life and problems that we missed the neighbor in need that God planted in our path, that we had the means to help but did not? When it comes to our earning favor with God by our works, or earning for ourselves eternal life to come, all it takes is one missed opportunity, one wrongfully motivated act, one refusal to help, and no number of good works can atone for them. As James tells us **James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.**

Jesus Work That Saves and Makes us Right with God

Whose Good Works can save us? The works of the One with the nail marks in His hands. Our Good works can never earn us anything before God. But that is okay. Jesus work on our behalf is more than enough to make up for it.

God chose us before we had done any kind of work that would ever earn us favor with Him. He chose us to be His own precious children. And He sent His only Son to earn that right for us. Jesus is the only person who filled His life with truly good and selfless works for others, never to benefit Himself personally, but always for the good of others. He gave of Himself unselfishly, forgoing sleep and food in loving service to others, even those that did not love Him.

But His greatest good work of selfless love was when He suffered and died on the cross to become our atoning sacrifice. His bleeding and dying benefited Him nothing personally but was done out of love for every single person that has lived or will ever live. He took all of their disobedience, all of their failures to do truly good works, as well as all of yours, and suffered and died to remove them from you.

He kept the command to do good works and did it perfectly for you, knowing you would never be able to. And He gives you the credit for His good works as the gift of faith. By faith we believe and trust that as our Lord and Savior, He has done all that is necessary for us to be right with God now and into eternal life. And even though we fail to be that in our own lives, He declares us to be right with God as His gift of grace by faith. Trusting in your own works will never save you, will never make you right with God. But trusting in His work for you will give you a life with Him now and eternal life to come.

Good Works Done in Christ

As believers in Christ our God still commands us to do good works. That has not changed. But our reason for doing them should change through faith in Christ. We do good works not to be saved or earn favor with God. Instead, we do them because we are saved and do have favor with God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

How does this happen? As part of Jesus' gracious gift of faith, the Holy Spirit gives us a new heart. This heart has the ability to love others unconditionally and unselfishly and the desire to obey God out of His love given and poured into those hearts. The Spirit is at work in us moving us to live new lives where the desire to obey God and love others grows through His work in Word and Sacrament. Our desire to do good works should never be reluctant obedience to the law but should spring from hearts made new by the Gospel that shows to us how Jesus first loved us.

It would be great if we could reach a point in our Christian life where our motivation for serving God and others always emanated from a pure heart. But while we live in this fallen world and still have sinful hearts and desires this will never be the case. Does that mean we should just give up on doing good works all together?

Consider Jane. She is a member of the same Lutheran Church as Cindy and Jim. She would be someone that they would consider doesn't do enough to earn any favor with God now or for eternity. She wants to do more to help out at Church and her neighbors, but her responsibilities to her family and to her work. Because she lacks time, she would love to make up for it through her giving of her treasures, but her family lives from paycheck to paycheck. She knows as a Christian that she should do works of love for her neighbors and her Church. But when she does, many times it's with an unwilling heart at first. And it's all too easy at times to find her motivation is to impress her friends, or out of guilt for not helping out other times.

But she doesn't let these things stop her from her call to serve her Lord and others in love. When the Spirit points these wrongful motives she sometimes has, or when she falls into the notion that she is earning favor with God over what is expected of her as a Christian, she confesses these things before her Savior, who points her to the cross and the greatest work of Christ who takes away all of her sin and continues to keep her in right standing with God by repentant faith. She holds fast to the truth from the lips of Jesus, that even when she falls short, she is in right standing with Him now and for eternity to come only by His gift of love poured out upon her daily through the Gospel message. And through the love of Christ that is renewed in her heart and mind, she knows the Spirit continues to work on her to grow her faith relationship and her willingness to serve others in love as Christ served her.

And where will she be on Judgment Day? At the right hand of God. And what will she hear? **Matthew 25:34-36** ³⁴**Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.** ³⁵**For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,** ³⁶**I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'** Now she may wonder when exactly she did all these things. But many of them happened as a natural reaction produced by the love of Christ placed in her heart and strengthened by the Spirit. She did these things not to be saved, but because she lives in a repentant faith relationship with Jesus Christ her Lord. And in that relationship, she knows and trusts that her standing before God is not from anything she did, but by everything Jesus has done and gives to her as His gift of grace by faith.

Conclusion

As James concludes this section of his Epistle in **James 2:17 faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead**. The thing is, saving faith in Christ is never without works. If you are totally lacking what God calls good works and the desire to love and care for your neighbor in need, then you have a faith problem with your Savior. At times that can be each one of us. That's why He sent the Holy Spirit to you in baptism, and why He keeps coming to you in Word and Sacrament. The Spirit is always at work creating and sustaining the desire within us to do works of love for others out of loving obedience to God. And when we hear ourselves doing them with the attitude of a teenager, "Do I have to??" He moves us to confess and repent, and so draw closer to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by whose work of love we are made right with God, receive life with Him now and eternal life to come, and find the reason and strength to love our neighbor as ourself. When may we find opportunities to do good works for Christ? In all our callings, walks of life, everywhere He places us to share His love and witness with our hands and mouth His saving grace. May the Lord keep working on us all until the day He calls us home. Amen.