

## **James 2:1-10,14-18**

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This morning we turn our attention to the book of James, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 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.”

Now that we are getting on in the year, many people are turning their thoughts to Fall. School is back in session, the temperature in the mornings at least is a little cooler, and

pumpkin spice everything is back on the shelves. The arrival of Fall also for many people means that Halloween is around the corner and all of the spookiness and frights that come with it. In the spirit of this, I wondered how to scare a bunch of Lutherans. Should I switch our coffee with decaf? No, too many tears would be shed. Perhaps we could have a potluck but then cancel it at the last minute. No, that would be too cruel. But then it hit me, talk about works! Nothing frightens Lutherans more than preaching about works. So, boo! We are going to spend the next few weeks this month looking at what James says to us.

What better place to start a reading of the book of James than with the trickiest bit? These verses have been thrown in our face by papists for five hundred years, claiming that we preach faith without works. People coming out of Evangelicalism struggle with this very same thing, how can we say that nothing is required of them? Then of course we have the lifelong

Lutherans who react to the discussion of good works like a vampire reacts to light. How do we reconcile these things in light of Scripture?

The easy answer is to face it head on and focus our attention on our works. James here says that faith without works is dead. This is absolutely clear. If you're not out there doing the works that God requires, then you should be worried. There's a bar that you need to clear if you want to get into heaven, and your work is the only way to get above it. And if you're not sure what works you should be doing, we will be more than happy to provide a list for you to choose from.

And what happens is you develop a whole system of works that God supposedly requires of you. And make no mistake, there is no shortage of things that we can add to the list.

Requiring confession a certain number of times a year.

Requiring certain dietary restrictions. Requiring certain amounts

of giving. Requiring people to act or look a certain way. Requiring people to cut off contact with someone who is deemed “a sinner.” People have become exceedingly efficient at creating new works for people to do because we’ve been making stuff up since after the Flood! The reason we are so quick to make up all kinds of things to do to please God is because we know deep down that there is a huge gulf between us and God because of our sin. And if we hope to get across it, we need to fill that gulf with our good works. But this is trying to fill an ocean with a teacup, so we need a whole lot of teacups.

The thing that makes this whole conversation about works and faith so complicated and raises the stakes significantly is that faith and salvation are clearly and inexorably linked.

Christians have always known that one must have faith to be saved. So the real question behind this question is this; what works are required to be saved? We see and hear so many

people who want to tell us that we need to be doing enough things to find our assurance of salvation. We can show our faith by what we do, so we'd better be doing a lot of stuff in order to find our comfort and assurance of salvation.

This is where Lutherans will turn away. For us to turn to our works as evidence of our salvation is what we mean often when we are speaking against "works righteousness." The difficulty is that when we say that we reject works righteousness, other Christians say, "of course! I too reject that idea." But the problem is that something is lost in translation. We understand that if we are looking for the assurance of our salvation or our assurance that God truly cares for us in what we do, we are finding our righteousness in our works and not in Christ.

Truly, it is easy to throw up these words from James that "faith without works is dead." But we must ask ourselves what

works we often are doing. In the first part of our text, James describes a congregation receiving a rich man with joy and a poor man with a dismissive welcome. The problem is that the first part of the reading today misses some important information. If we would fill in the gap in the pericope, it would be helpful. For context, let's start with verse 10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Faith without works may be dead, but works do not save us nor do they give us any hint of comfort! Truly, all of our works are circumspect. Sure, you gave some money to that homeless

person, but did you do it because that makes you feel good about yourself? You cared for your children, but did the fact that jail awaits negligent parents help inspire you to do what maybe you didn't want to do? Yes, you did a nice thing for your spouse, but what did they do for you in return?

But even if we want to claim that our good deeds were done without ulterior motives, we must all admit that we are transgressors of God's Law. We have all lied, murdered, stolen, committed adultery, and ultimately had other gods. We deserve the wrath and righteous punishment of God. We may show our faith by our works, but our works also reveal our faithlessness more often than we'd like.

But yet "mercy triumphs over judgment." We deserve the punishment of God, yet there is no punishment for us. We approach death like a character in a horror movie, who knows that they're trapped and there is nowhere to run. We squeeze our

eyes closed as hard as we can, but when nothing comes, we dare to take a peek. And there is no monster there waiting for us.

There is no executioner or angry judge. Instead, there is our Lord Jesus Christ. It was Christ who took our punishment. It is Christ who gives us mercy. And his mercy triumphs over the judgment that we rightly deserve.

And he gives us mercy because he was crucified on the cross in your place and mine. He is the one who received the punishment. It was Christ who was shown no mercy so that you and I would receive mercy. Indeed, we have received mercy.

The salvation won by Christ at the cross is something that is for all people, including you and including me though we do not deserve it. It is Christ who has filled that gulf between us and God, and it is filled not with his works, but with his own innocent blood shed for us at the cross.

Instead of punishment and distain, we have received righteousness and salvation. We put our trust in Christ and we look to him for our assurance. We look to Christ alone for this assurance. And this is something that is significant for us. I once heard someone say that the whole Reformation was about assurance. How can you be sure that you have salvation? How can you be sure that you have been forgiven? The answer for so many had been that you had to look to your works to find comfort. But yet in Christ, we are invited to look not to ourselves, but to the Gospel and to the cross. We look outside of ourselves because we know ourselves to be fallible people.

So, do we as Lutheran Christians do good works? Of course we do! We do them because they are good. We do them to show the love of Christ to our neighbor. We do them because we are living out the new life that is ours in Christ. We don't do them to find our assurance, but we do them because that is what

it means to live out this life that is ours in Christ. We belong to Jesus who bought us through his blood, and he wills us to serve our neighbors. And so we do. But we continually keep our eyes fixed on the cross and on our Lord Jesus himself for our comfort because in him, there is no fear at all. Even for Lutherans.

Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting.

Amen.