

September 8, 2024
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

James 2:1–10, 14–18

FAITH AND WORKS.

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

Our text for meditation this morning is our epistle text, written by St. James. James is the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. During Jesus' earthly ministry, James didn't accept Jesus as the Christ or His divine authority. (cf: John 7:5) He and the rest of his family thought Jesus was out of His mind. (cf: Mark 3:21) The Bible doesn't say exactly *when* James came to faith in Christ, but it implies that it was after Jesus' appeared to him following His resurrection. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:7) After his conversion James had a strong faith and a passion for ministry to the Jews. He would become the head of the Christian church at Jerusalem. (cf: Acts 12:17; 21:18; Galatians 2:9) While he was not numbered among the Twelve original apostles, he was regarded as an apostle. (cf: James 1:1; Galatians 1:19; "James (Person)," Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, 1090)

Another person not numbered among the original Twelve apostles but regarded as an apostle is St. Paul. Formerly known as Saul, a Pharisee and persecutor of Christ's Church, Paul came to faith after the resurrected Christ Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Three days later at the home of Ananias, Paul was baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to proclaim Jesus as the Christ. (cf: Acts 9:1–20) While James focused his ministry on the Jews, Paul focused his ministry on the Gentiles. James only has one epistle letter included in the canon of the New Testament. Paul has thirteen.

Martin Luther was critical of James's epistle because it lacked the Gospel. When he compared it to St. John's Gospel, St. Paul's epistles, and the first epistle of Peter and John, Luther said James was "*an epistle of straw*". (cf: LW 35, 362) But straw is not a bad thing. It's quite useful. From ancient times straw has been used for making bricks. It's great bedding for animals. Even Luther probably slept on a mattress stuffed with straw. Just because James' epistle didn't crack Luther's top ten books of the Bible, he had a change of heart regarding the epistle and quoted it in his writings just as much as he did the Synoptic Gospels. (cf: Giese, James, Concordia Commentary, 60)

It is true that unlike Paul's many letters, James' epistle doesn't lay out complex theological and doctrinal themes. James makes no mention of Jesus' incarnation, sufferings, death, or resurrection. He only mentions Christ twice in the entire letter. (cf: James 1:1, 2:1) Many people try to pit Paul's writings against James.' They point to Paul's letter the Ephesian Christians where he says:

"⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast."
(Ephesians 2:8–9)

And then they point to James in our text this morning where he writes:

"¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" "... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:14, 17)

So which is it? Is it faith alone – or is it works? It sounds like St. Paul and St. James contradict one another when it comes to faith and works, but that's not the case. The Holy Spirit used various writers with different focus and terminology to create and sustain faith in the hearts of the hearers. James was writing to Jewish Christians who were scattered throughout the Mediterranean world following Stephan's execution. (cf: James 1:1; Acts 8:1–3) He was writing to Christians that knew that they were declared not guilty of their sins and saved by faith in Christ alone. He is writing to encourage and urge these first-generation Christians as they face trials and the testing of their faith to live as Christians. In Paul's letters, he is more concerned about doctrinal details and how Gentiles are brought to salvation in Christ. James, however, is echoing Jesus' teaching that a tree is known by its fruit. Fruits of repentance and faith flow from the one who trusts in Christ Jesus. (cf: Matthew 7:15–20, 21:43) Near the beginning of his letter, James writes:

"¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."
(James 1:16–18)

God is the giver of all good things, particularly the gift of salvation and new life in Christ. All that you have and all that you are – are a gift from Him. And because James is writing to those who know they're declared not guilty of their sins and saved by faith in Christ alone, including you and me, James spends most of his letter discussing the right use of God's gifts.

In our text James says:

"¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." (James 2:1)

What does this mean? Don't judge a book by its cover. You're a Christian. Don't judge others based on worldly criteria. Treat all people with fairness, equality, and justice, no matter their social or economic standing... no matter if they're Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Do not act as the unbelievers in the unbelieving world do.

Unfortunately and sadly, how often do you and I baptized believers break what we could call James' code of Christian conduct? How do you show partiality and favoritism to those who are rich and attractive – compared to how you treat the poor and the downtrodden? Don't forget, Jesus died for every toothless panhandler and spaced out drug addict stumbling down the sidewalk. James says:

"⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5)

You and I overlook many of our neighbors because they don't display the characteristics that we're comfortable with. Playing favorites based on outward appearances is the way of the world. You ignore many because you assume they can't do anything for you in return. But thanks be to God that our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus never practices such selfish favoritism. (cf: 1 Corinthians 1:27–29) And He expects the same of those who fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. (cf: Leviticus 19:15) Brothers and sisters... repent!

Who is it or what is it that you truly fear, love, and trust in above all things? Look at your checkbook or credit card statement and see where the majority of your income goes and that will be your compass. Where do you spend your time, your talents, and your treasure? Just as upkeep and maintenance of your automobile and home are necessary works, so are the works of upkeep and maintenance of this church, so that the Gospel continues to be proclaimed, and Sacraments administered in this place. God graciously promises to give us all that we need for this body and life – and therefore in response – the Christian gives their tithes and offerings to the church trusting that God will provide for all our *needs* – though not necessarily our *wants*.

The subject of tithing can be controversial among Lutherans because tithing was part of the Old Testament law specifically given to Israel. In the New Testament we are simply told to be generous in our freedom in the Gospel of Christ, for the God loves a cheerful giver. (cf: 2 Corinthians 9:10–12) St. Paul directed the churches of Galatia to put something aside on first day of every week in accordance with how they prospered to be collected to support the church in Jerusalem. (cf: 1 Corinthians 16:1–4) So, too, it's the responsibility of all Christians to support their local church.

What proportion of your income should you prayerfully consider giving to the church? In the Old Testament, for those living under the promise of a Savior, the percentage was set at 10%, a tithe. In the New Testament, living with the promise fulfilled, we're told to excel in generosity. (cf: 2 Corinthians 8:1–7) So, shouldn't 10% be a good start? Jesus said:

"²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21)

After all, if we can trust the Lord with our eternal salvation, cannot we trust Him to provide our daily bread? Brothers and sisters... repent!

James asks Christians of all times and all places:

"¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" (James 2:14)

Without bearing the fruit of faith, the good works that flow from the faith of the One who first loved you to death on Calvary's cross, a genuine faith that clings to Christ alone for forgiveness, life, and salvation – if you don't bear fruits of faith, then what good is that kind of "faith." Faith with no evidence is a false faith. It's dead faith. It's no faith at all.

And this is why James wrote his epistle the way he did. His epistle may be an epistle of straw. But straw has value, especially when it comes from God. The Holy Spirit spoke through James to address our temptation to take our faith in Christ for granted. Tempted to let our trust in Christ become a cheap bed of straw. A cheap grace. Such a dead faith is not compatible with the Christian identity – the new life in Christ bestowed on you at the baptismal font, where, by divine grace, you were adopted by God as His own child, a brother of James, the brother of the Lord Jesus. A dead, inactive faith rejects the unity of Christ's living body. But a living faith receives Christ and displays that faith to the world by performing works of love flowing from faith.

Can you do it perfectly? Of course not. But you are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do better. Not to earn salvation but in response to the salvation won for you on the cross. Christ Jesus took your sins of favoritism, partiality, and prejudice – and lack of good works of giving your time, your talents, and your treasure, to the cross and died for them so you might be forgiven of them.

I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Baptism, you have died to sin. (cf: Romans 6:1–2) And that's not an excuse to knowingly and willingly continuing in your sins. Instead, Christ's love mandates that you live in imitation of Him. Faith without works is dead, and you're deceiving yourself if you call yourself a Christian and lack any evidence of a living sanctified Christian life.

Having faith in Christ, that He has lived the perfect life and died the perfect death in your stead, and trusting that His gifts of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are bestowed unto you in Word and Sacrament, it brings forth the fruits God desires in works pleasing to him. Christ Jesus is the first fruits and pattern of God's grace and love in mercy, especially to those whom the world considers to be outsiders and worthless, including you and me. He shows no partiality but desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth – and love their neighbors as themselves. (cf: 1 Timothy 2:3–4)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.