

Putting Feet to Our Faith

James 2:1-10, 14-18

Introduction

All this month the Epistle lessons are from the book of **James**. James is known for his treatment of faith and works. Some people argue that James teaches salvation by works. This could not be further from the truth. Paul and James are coming at the same topic from two different perspectives. Paul is defending the doctrine of justification against the Judaizers, who were saying that Christ wasn't enough. One must keep the Law if one wants to be saved. James is addressing concerns about things that were going on in the church, like partiality, not caring for the poor and needy, hypocrisy, worldliness, boasting, trusting in wealth, and the like. Christians, because we are saved by the blood of Christ must look different from the rest of the world. James is pointing out what it means to walk by faith. So, this month we will be examining the **WORKS OF FAITH**. What you believe determine how you act. Or as James puts it, *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:17)*. Today, we examine the relationship between faith and works. The rest of the month, we will see how this affects what we say and do, and what it means to be the church.

The Controversy Over Good Works

Of course, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Martin Luther said that this is the pillar of the church. If we lose sight of this, we lose the church. The Roman church jumped on this and accused the Lutherans of being opposed to good works, and even not believing there is now any binding Law of God for the Christian. In response to this, Melancthon wrote, *good works are necessary for salvation*. George Major taught that without good works nobody can be saved. Overreacting to this, Nicholas Amsdorf said that good works are harmful and detrimental to salvation. This confusion carries over in the church today. Lutheran pastor, Geoff Robinson said, *When I was a student at the seminary in St. Louis, an elder at a congregation I had preached at said to me that he loved being a Lutheran because he didn't have to do anything*. How can we navigate this swamp of controversy?

Good Works Defined

To begin with, we must understand what "good works" are. Drawing from the **Formula of Concord**, good works are those things:

- Prescribed and commanded by God in His Word. Things merely commanded by men are not good works.
- Done by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. This speaks to our motivation and ability as fallen people.
- Acceptable by God for the sake of Christ through faith. This is what it means to be clothed in Christ's righteousness. We, and everything we do, are acceptable to God only for Christ's sake.

Things are not good works:

- If the motive is should, ought, must, good intention, or even altruism.

- If done from one's own natural powers, as our natural abilities fall short of God's glory (**Romans 3:23**).
- If they are done to maintain outward discipline, like diet and exercise.

These may be commendable before the world and even rewarded by God with temporal blessings, such as a longer, happier, healthier life. But, since they do not come from true faith, they are stained by sin and regarded by God as sins. In short, good works are those works that are the fruit of faith and they are the only fruit of faith.

A Necessary Fruit

In agricultural terms, faith is the root of salvation, while good works are the fruit of salvation. Jesus says in **Matthew 7**, (Read **Matthew 7:15-20**). The fruit it produces is how you can tell what the tree is, or what kind of person one is. What is fruit? Is it just something that looks good, that a tree can live without? Is it just something a tree produces to be food for animals? No, the fruit is a vital part of the tree's life. It is necessary for reproduction. The fruit contains the seed. When the fruit falls to the ground and is left undisturbed, it rots and decays. It becomes the nutrition the seed needs to get a good start in life. In the same way, while good works are voluntary, they are not optional. Good works are necessary fruit of the Christian because good works are how saving faith expresses itself. Good works are the evidence of the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, our Source of faith. In short, faith alone saves; but faith is never alone.

Means of Grace

Paul says in **Ephesians 2:10**, *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* When Christ strengthens our faith by His body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, He does so that we may **PUT FEET TO OUR FAITH**, and produce its fruit, good works.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
