

THE MESSAGE

January 31, 2010

James 2:14-26

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Our Faith

Why... why are thousands of people helping out this weekend offering support to the crisis in Haiti? Many people might respond: "Isn't it obvious? It's a way to do something good in the world." They would be right, it is. And yet, as Christians, it goes even deeper than that. But before we go there, let's look at our reading from James for today. James gives us a peek into the Christian world of faith and good works.

(Read James 2:14-16.)

For us Lutherans, this whole idea of faith and good works has a colorful history. Martin Luther and the Reformers wanted to keep these two separated as far away from each other as possible. The reason was obvious. The Church in their day had so distorted good works.

People were led to believe that their good works were necessary to get in and stay in God's good grace. Under this oppressive church system, Luther turned to the Bible and in the book of Romans he rediscovered the essence of the gospel. We are not saved by our good works; *we are saved by grace through faith alone.*

This is our key doctrine as Lutheran Christians. This is our bread and butter. This is our keystone for building up the faith. This is our banner statement. We are not saved by our good works; *we are saved by grace through faith alone.*

We are saved by grace through faith alone. Say that with me. *We are saved by grace through faith alone.*

Luther was so convinced of the need to teach this biblical truth that he considered removing the book of James from the Bible; all because of the very text we are looking at here this morning, which on the surface seems to contradict that we are saved by grace.

And yet... faith and good works are two sides of the same coin. They go hand in hand. So let's take a look at good works from a New Testament perspective, as we consider the motivation for doing good works in the world today. (Good works = serving others who don't deserve it. Who here today deserves God's grace? None of us do!)

Luther found support from Jesus regarding the place of good works in our lives. In John 6:28-29, Jesus says that when it comes to eternal life it's not about good works. It's about faith. It's about believing in God and in Jesus as the Son of God.

Good deeds don't save us, never have and never will. Faith does. But it's not our faith, it's Jesus' faith within us. Jesus' faith saves us. Lest we somehow turn faith

into a good works... even faith is a gift. For us then good works play a different role in our lives. Our good works grow out of our faith in Jesus or rather Jesus' faith in us, which is what this text in James is all about.

When moved by God's grace in our lives we see it a privilege to serve the undeserving; serving not because we have to but because we are compelled by God's grace to serve others. That's Jesus' faith at work within us.

Ephesians 2 says that each one of us was created to do good works in this world. God created us for good works. Serving is part of our life-assignment from God. God wants to accomplish good things in the world through us. Why? Because of John 3:16. *For God so loved the world... that God sent Jesus... to do the ultimate good deed on the cross, which opened the door for all eternity.*

In the first letter of Timothy it says we are to become rich in doing good deeds. Imagine becoming rich by doing good deeds? What a concept!

In the book of Hebrews we are told to stir up one (provoke) another in love and good works. That's why in the church we think about, talk about, act upon, and work together to do good deeds – good works. It's part of who we are, not for our sake but for Jesus' sake. That's why all of our LIFE Groups have a service element to them. That is where you really grow in the faith by serving others.

But there's more – with God there's always more. In a time like ours with so much change and uncertainty words alone seem untrustworthy or worse, hypocritical. Our actions speak louder than our words.

Saint Francis of Assisi said it so well: “Go and preach the gospel to the whole world, and use words, if you have to.” Think about that... The best sermons don't come from the pulpit or from paid preachers but from people like you doing good deeds of love.

The best way to tell the story of God's love is by doing good deeds – serving others. Wouldn't it be awesome if we were known as the serving church? After all, that's why Jesus came in the first place to serve. *God so loved the world that he sent his only Son... to show us how to love* – back to John 3:16. Our actions carry so much more integrity than our words. Love is our motivator.

That begs a deeper question. “There are a lot of people doing good works in the world but they don't go to church and they may not believe in God. Where is God in all of that?”

Great question! Truth is, God knows every good deed done by everyone.

There is a great story in the book of Acts, chapter 10, about a man named Cornelius. Cornelius was not a Christian, not even Jewish, but he prayed and did good

works for the people around him. One night, an angel visited Cornelius, and said: “*Your prayers and your gifts to the poor have come up as a fragrance before God.*”

God is aware of everyone’s good works and they all are a sweet-smelling fragrance before God. What a great image!

Good works are valued by God, regardless of who is doing them. That’s why James can say... *faith without good works is dead.* As I said earlier faith and good works are two sides of the same coin.

Story: There was a church that had a life-size statue of Jesus right inside the front door. He stood as the risen Lord in a white robe with arms stretched out welcoming one and all as they entered the church building. As fate would have it a fire burned down the church building. The Jesus statue was recovered from the rubble but his hands and feet were broken off. The congregation was devastated not because of the fire but because of what had happened to Jesus. They considered replacing him. Until a little 10-year-old boy suggested that the people become the hands and feet of Jesus by serving others. They put Jesus back where he was as he was without his hands and feet and placed a sign for all to read. “Our Jesus has no hands or feet but ours.”

The hands and feet of Jesus isn’t what we do, it who we are. We are the hands and feet of Jesus. We live by faith and good works until Jesus comes again. Until God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

People of faith do good works. We serve others without expecting anything in return because we have already been blessed by God to do so.

I invite you – no I challenge you – to do one significant act of service this week for someone who doesn’t deserve it. Do it in the name of Jesus. Go from here to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Live the faith. Share the good news of God’s love and use words only if you have to. Amen.