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Proper 18 • James 2:1–10, 14–18

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Proper 18 • James 2:1–10, 14–18 • September 6, 2015

In chapter two of his epistle James warns these Christians about the danger of “head faith.” He doesn’t specifically label it as head faith, but that seems to be what he is referring to. Note what James says in 2:19, the verse immediately following our text, “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and tremble.” He’s talking about faith that is based solely on knowledge about God—head faith—but which bears no fruit. Even Satan and his demons have that kind of faith, yet still they tremble. This is not saving faith. They are damned for eternity.

What about Christians? Can a Christian have only this kind of faith? How can you tell? James points to good works as being evidence of saving faith? If one’s faith does not produce good works, it cannot be saving faith. Faith doesn’t show partiality. Faith moves you to love your neighbor as yourself. Faith is active in love. But faith without works is dead. In 2:14 James asks, “Can such faith save?” The expected answer is no. So, a Christian who has only head faith, doesn’t have saving faith, and is therefore not really a Christian at all.

James is not accusing his readers of not having saving faith. He addresses them as “brothers” (2:1). He does this fifteen times throughout the entire epistle. However, certain actions and attitudes prevalent among them caused him to issue a warning about the place of good works in the life of a Christian. They are not immune from falling away. James uses the example of showing partiality to the rich who come into their assembly. He also uses the example of not helping a brother or sister in need. This is not how a brother who holds the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ lives.

As Christians, there is always the temptation for us to be more “head-faith” than “heart-faith” people. We are all sinners whose works and very lives are tainted by sin. The preaching of the law in the sermon should bring the hearers to the point of self-examination, to recognize their failures when it comes to good works. Specifically, in what ways have you shown partiality in the congregation? Have you refused or avoided helping a brother or sister who is truly in need? On the other hand, lest a person think he is full of good works and making progress at rooting out sin, let him hear James 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law, but stumbles at one point, has become guilty of all.” In other words, even one sin means we are guilty of breaking the whole law. While works are certainly evidence of a living faith, they will never provide certainty for salvation. That is found not in us, but in the objective gospel of Christ.

This is what is sorely lacking in many churches today with regards to the topic

of good works. Much of popular preaching, especially what our people hear on TV, is filled with the urgency of doing more works. “Stop doing that and do more of this” is often the advice given. But doing more works is not the remedy for dead faith. That’s confusing law and gospel. Those who have been convicted by the law and are aware of their sin, perhaps even to the point of questioning their salvation, need the comfort of the gospel of Jesus Christ, lest they be left in turmoil and despair. More law preaching will produce not more works, but terror.

Here, we as Lutherans, have the opportunity to clarify the biblical teaching of faith and good works with the proper distinction of law and gospel. Stanza five of “Salvation unto Us Has Come” summarizes it well:

Faith clings to Jesus’ cross alone
And rests in Him unceasing;
And by its fruit true faith is known,
With love and hope increasing.
For faith alone can justify;
Works serve our neighbor and supply
The proof that faith is living.

Good works are certainly a result, a fruit of faith to serve our neighbor. As James says, they even give evidence of faith. However, we don’t increase faith by doing more good works. Faith clings to the cross of Jesus Christ alone! Only the Holy Spirit can create and strengthen faith—heart faith—by the gospel. Christians need a solid connection to Jesus, the Vine (Jn 15), to receive the fruits of his cross and to bear much fruit. God shows no partiality. He offers his Son to the whole world, to all sinners.

We have been gifted with a rock-solid connection to Jesus through his promise to be present for us in his word and in the sacraments. This wonderful connection was begun in your baptism and continues in absolution and Holy Communion. Faith filled with Christ himself can’t help but be active in love toward others. In the liturgy following our reception of the sacrament of the altar we even pray, “Strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another.” It is no wonder then that we also pray in the Collect of the Day: “O God, without whose blessing we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and govern our hearts; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. . . . Amen.”