

Sermon for The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: September 2, 2018

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Isaiah 35:4–7a

Epistle Reading: James 2:1–10, 14–18

Gospel Reading: Mark 7:24–30

Sermon Text: James 2:1-10, 14-18

Sermon Title: Works are Required!

Introit: Psalm 51:7, 10–12; Antiphon: Psalm 51:2

Hymns:

LSB 768 – To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray

LSB 761 – Rock of Ages Cleft for Me

LSB 528 – Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

Liturgy:

Divine Service I, p. 151



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Text: James 2:1-10, 14-18

My brothers and sisters, practice your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ by not favoring one person over another. For example, two men come to your worship service. One man is wearing gold rings and fine clothes; the other man, who is poor, is wearing shabby clothes.

Suppose you give special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say to him, “Please have a seat.” But you say to the poor man, “Stand over there,” or “Sit on the floor at my feet.” Are you not discriminating against people and using a corrupt standard to make judgments?

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! Didn’t God choose poor people in the world to become rich in faith and to receive the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? Yet, you show no respect to poor people. Don’t rich people oppress you and drag you into court? Don’t they curse the honorable name of Jesus, the name by which you were called.?

You are doing right if you obey this law from the highest authority: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” If you favor one person over another, you’re sinning, and this law convicts you of being disobedient. If someone obeys all of God’s laws except one, that person is guilty of breaking all of them.

My brothers and sisters, what good does it do if someone claims to have faith but doesn’t do any good things? Can this kind of faith save him?

Suppose a believer, whether a man or a woman, needs clothes or food and one of you tells that person, “God be with you! Stay warm, and make sure you eat enough.” If you don’t provide for that person’s physical needs, what good does it do? In the same way, faith by itself is dead if it doesn’t cause you to do any good things.

Another person might say, “You have faith, but I do good things.” Show me your faith apart from the good things you do. I will show you my faith by the good things I do.

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Grace, peace and mercy be yours in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is so good to be Lutheran! Really, think about it. We understand that we are not saved by works. We understand that we do not have to earn, in fact cannot earn, extra credit or points with God no matter how much good we try to do. We understand that our salvation is based on Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection alone!

We have our own Lutheran Latin slogan to drive that point home. (Everything sounds better in Latin you know.)

Sola Fide
Sola Gratia
Sola Scriptura

Faith Alone
Grace Alone
Scripture Alone

We are saved by the faith that God instills in us. Not by our own faith but by the faith the Holy Spirit works in us. That is the reason we Baptize even the smallest of children. Because we know it is:

“not by [human] might, nor by [human] power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD.¹”

In Baptism it is not your work that you bring to God but rather it is God’s work that He bring to you. You cannot contribute anything. Think about it for a moment. What is it that you think you have that God needs? Name the great riches or wonders you posses that He did not create.

There was a scientist who once got this point a little mixed up. The scientist claimed that he had finally, utterly and completely, eliminated the archaic need for God. Man could become god. The scientist had discovered how to create life out of nothing.

Well God heard about this and, always wanting to keep on top of such things, decided to head down to Earth to investigate these claims. After all He had a monopoly on the whole “creating something out of nothing” thing and there may be grounds for patent infringement. So God left His regal throne and went down to Earth. He made His way to the laboratory and there He found the scientist hard at work.



As the scientist looked up and saw God he said, “We have no need for You around here any more! I have replaced You with myself.”

God, humoring the man said, “Oh really? Just what is it you can do that replaces Me?”

The scientist replied, “I can create life out of nothing. You are obsolete.” The scientist was just a little bit arrogant, as you may imagine.

God, still humoring the scientist, said, “Well perhaps we can compare notes. Why don’t you show Me how you do it, then I’ll show you My own technique and perhaps together we can improve on the whole process.”

The scientist, quite proud of himself at having God ask him for advice agreed. God said, “You go first. After all this is all new for you.”

The scientist began, “First we take some dirt, and then ...”

God abruptly interrupted, “Wait just a minute here. You go get your own dirt! I made that.”

What is it that you think you have that God needs? Name the great riches or wonders you posses that He did not create.

1 Zechariah 4:6

It is God's faith not your faith; it is God's grace not your grace; it is God's Word not your words that bring about your salvation. You bring nothing to the equation. It is so good to be Lutheran because we can rest assured that our salvation has been won, and all that needs to be done has been done because it relies solely and only upon God's perfect work which He has accomplished perfectly for us. That is why we sing:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling.²

"Works are unnecessary and obsolete. All that is required is that I go to church and put in my hour ..." Oops! Going to church – that sounds like a work. Maybe I don't have to go to church either. After all God is in all places at all times. I can worship God anywhere. Church is for those less holy and pious than myself. Those less-spiritual than me."

I hope you are starting to understand that there is something wrong that. Like the scientist I have gone too far in my claims. Is it in fact true that works are not required at all? The answer is, "Yes." and "No." You see in the letter James wrote he is quite clear that works are required. He goes so far as to say in verse 17:

In the same way, faith by itself is dead if it does not cause you to do any good things.

James says that without works you have no faith at all. You are not saved. Heaven does not wait for you. In fact Hell waits for you because your faith is dead.

So one of two things is going on here. It could be that the Bible contradicts itself. Maybe God is not perfect and His Word has flaws in it. (*Probably not.*)

The other possibility is that we are missing something in our search for the Truth. I was not wrong when I said, "It is so good to be Lutheran!" You see we have the answers. It was Luther who explained this so very well. He called it, "Two Kinds of Righteousness."

Righteousness – Now there's a church-y word. What does that mean? Righteousness is a way of saying your "good stuff." The "good stuff" in you that pleases God. There is "good stuff" in you and it does please God. It is just that there are two kinds of "good stuff," two kinds of righteousness.

We understand that our righteousness before God is the work of God alone. It is true that there is nothing we can bring to God but our empty hands. We lean on Him and Him alone for our salvation. God be praised!

Do you really want the responsibility of having anything to do with your eternal salvation? Think about it. What if you missed something, or made a mistake, or forgot something? God demands absolute perfection. Since our salvation relies on Him alone we know beyond all doubt that we are saved because He is perfect. He has completed everything perfectly. That is the first kind of "good stuff" or righteousness in us. The work God has done for us on our behalf.

Between God and us everything flows only down. We cannot go find God. Consider it this way. Sometimes people think that they can get closer to God on the top of a mountain. Well you have all seen those pictures of the Earth from the Moon. It looks like a quiet and serene blue planet floating in space. Of course space is bigger than that. There are other planets too. They revolve around the Sun. The sun is in a Galaxy containing billions of other stars. The Galaxy is in a larger structure called a super-structure, a collection of galaxies. Then there is the whole universe made up of countless super-structures. All of this is held in the palm of God's hand.



Mount Everest

If you climbed to the top of mount Everest, the highest place on the surface of our planet, how far would you really have gone in getting closer to God?

The truth is not very far at all. The truth is we cannot get to God. We cannot even know anything about God unless He comes down into His own creation and tells us about Him.

That is the first kind of righteousness. What we sometimes call “vertical righteousness” because it is between God and us. In vertical righteousness everything flows down. It all comes from God to us.

The second type of “good stuff” or righteousness is called, “horizontal righteousness.” It is the “good stuff” between us and those people around us, our neighbors. Between them and you there is the second kind of righteousness and that righteousness requires your good works. You are required by God to do “good works” because your neighbor needs you to.

There are times when you know of someone who is in need and you have the means to help them. You should. Your neighbor needs you to. When you contribute to various social charities or when you as a congregation choose to send resources to help people, whether here in our own community or some place far away. When you do that you are doing “good works.” Works that help out our fellow man.

Previously I mentioned coming to church as a good work. Is it? Yes! You come to church for a number of reasons but the two big ones are first to strengthen and grow in your own faith. The second is to support and help those who are being tested or who are not as strong as you in the faith.

If church was a place where only the weakest Christians came they would have no one to look up to. When you, who are strong in your faith, come and worship here you bolster and support those who are not as strong as you or those going through difficult trials.

By obeying God and coming to worship, as He commands,³ you are not earning any points with God. In that respect you are simply doing what He commands us to do. However you are earning something with your neighbor. You are earning their respect. You are earning their love because you are here.

There is as poem. It ended like this:

The question:

O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

The Answer:

That you are here—that life exists, and identity;

That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.⁴

Because you are here you contribute to the outreach of this church. Because you are here others are strengthened. Because you are here others are encouraged. Because you are here others hold fast to a faith that is being tested. Because you are here you are doing the work of God. You are being a faithful Christian man or Christian woman honoring God and supporting your fellow neighbor, because you are here.

³ Exodus 20:8-11

⁴ O me! O Life! - Written by: Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

That is just the beginning. From here it grows outward. Out into your life. Into the community in which this congregation lives and works. Then further out into the county, the state, the nation, the world, and as far as God would have us reach. That is what all of this is all about. Doing the works of God.



The works of God are summed up best in Matthew chapter 28 where it says:

Wherever you go, make disciples of all nations: Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to do everything I have commanded you.⁵

All “good works” have a goal and purpose. To strengthen the faith of the weak and to teach the faith to those who do not yet know it. When you as a congregation are doing those “good works” people on the outside see it. When they visit us here they see it. That righteousness is the simple hospitality which they receive when they walk through the door; the friendly faces and warm greetings they encounter. That is what evangelism is all about. Bearing witness to God, first through our action, then through our words, as we teach God’s Word to all people.

It is good to be Lutheran. We can and should take pride in our faith and our Confessions. We have the peace of being righteous before God because God made us so, and righteous before each other because God commanded us to be so. That we can do because God has blessed us and enabled us to be witnesses to Him.

There is a phrase I’ve heard from time to time that I think fits well:

“You are the only Jesus some people will ever see.”

The Church is the body of Christ, and as such, our work is to spread His Word. There is a song by the group Casting Crowns called, “If We Are the Body.” The Chorus read:

If we are the Body
Why aren’t His arms reaching
Why aren’t His hands healing
Why aren’t His words teaching
And if we are the Body
Why aren’t His feet going
Why is His love not showing them there is a way?



There is another song by a man named Brian Heath called, “Give Me Your Eyes.” Its chorus reads like this:

Give me your eyes for just one second
Give me your eyes so I can see
Everything that I keep missing
Give me your love for humanity
Give me your arms for the broken-hearted
The ones that are far beyond my reach
Give me your heart for the ones forgotten
Give me your eyes so I can see



5 Matthew 28:19-20

You just might be the only Jesus some people will ever see. In your life try to emulate Jesus. Be patient with one another. Be honest with one another. Be Christian with one another. Doing the works God has given us to do.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.