

1My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?



8You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 9But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. [11For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.]

*14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. **James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17***

"And in This Corner...!"

The above is our 2nd reading for Sunday, September 8th, and is one of the most notable passages in the New Testament, in my opinion. It's from the 2nd Chapter of James. We Protestants, and especially we Lutherans rarely get to hear from James, and there's a reason. Many of the reformers in Luther's day got queasy when they heard the word "works". This is because of the strong influence of St. Paul on Lutheran theology.

Remember Paul's letters often talk about works, and faith, and the two, according to Paul, seem to be mutually exclusive. Look at Ephesians 2, where he writes one of the most famous sentences in the entire NT - "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works - so that no one may boast." You know this saying from Paul. But in Galatians, he gets more specific when he talks about the "law" and works. There, multiple times, Paul refers to "works of the law". Works of the law. What does that mean?

Paul is referring and writing to his Jewish community, calling them to account for works of the law. He's referring to works of the Law of Moses. Things like adhering to strict dietary laws, who is ritually clean and unclean, what to wear, when to worship, working on the Sabbath and such. He's saying that it's when we focus our lives on these things that we're more concerned about "works" than about loving God and neighbor. If you were around last week, you heard me talk about this in

my message, where often, his Jewish community was more concerned about getting it just right, than about loving God and neighbor, and serving those in need. It's as though his community thought they could earn God's favor by strict adherence to the Law of Moses, when in fact, it did just the opposite. Striving to adhere to all of these laws took their eyes off of God.

I often wish that we could go back in time, and collect the DNA from James and Paul, and recreate them sort of in a "Frankenstein-ish" way, bringing them back to life, and putting them together in the same room (or boxing ring, if you will.) In one corner would be James, and in the opposite corner would be Paul. The moderator would bring up "works", and ask them how they feel about "works". I have to believe that there would be little daylight between the two of them when it came to this subject. James is saying something like where you see good works, there you see faith in Jesus Christ, and vice versa. Faith in, or the faith of Jesus, compels us to go and serve God and neighbor. We do it because we know that because God has first loved us, we naturally go and serve our neighbor - we just do!

Hearing this from James, I think you'd see Paul in the other corner, nodding his head in complete agreement with James, saying, "Of course. Where there is faith, there are good works. In my writings I most often referred to 'works of the law'", writing to my Jewish community. "Remember when I wrote in Galatians 2, "And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing works of the law, because no one will be justified by doing works of the law." In other words, Paul is in complete agreement with James on this issue, I think, in that we aren't justified - made right in the eyes of God, by works, but that faith, without works, is dead.

We were taught in our seminary training that the letter of James was largely antithetical to Pauline theology, because of his referencing "works". Luther himself even called James, an "epistle of straw". He was meaning that James' letter was hollow, and without merit and meaning. But Luther didn't like a lot of things, and wasn't afraid to let you know how he felt.

The bottom line here? Where you see good works - people doing good deeds for their fellow human beings, there in the midst of it all, is Christ in the Holy Spirit. Speaking of good works, thanks to you who have prepared food for our friends and colleagues at Fire Station #14, just down the road from our church. Tomorrow is the 10th anniversary of the ELCA's project, "God's Work; Our Hands". Again this year, we will take what food items you have prepared, and deliver them tomorrow to the Fire Company, for all to enjoy. They really appreciate our congregation's acknowledgment of their efforts. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Pastor Greg