

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, our Lord, and our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

No doubt this is a challenging passage, from a difficult letter. It leads us to ask questions about faith, works, our sin, the circumstances of others, and our motivations (our hearts). There are risks that we can easily slip into error and false teaching, even false understanding, and place our faith in things other than our Saviour.

When we read about faith and works we could come to this conclusion:

I don't do good works, so I have no faith.

This is a terrible situation to be in, to use my failed good works to measure my faith. It only leads us to despair as we see how often we do not do the good works that God requests of us. Faith is not the object of our faith, nor is works; that is, we do not trust in our own ability to have faith or to do good works. We trust in Jesus' ability to save us, Jesus is the object of our faith.

How should we see our failed works? The things we don't do that we know we should, and the things we do do that we know we shouldn't. We should recognize that they are sin, that we are sinners and whenever we see our sin we should have the same reaction, 'I need a saviour!'

We look to our Saviour, the one who was faithful until the very end. Who did not turn back but came to save us. Who did the works required of him, and us, so that we could be found in his righteousness. We don't trust our own works but trust His work for us where His mercy triumphs over our judgment.

There are other errors we can slip into regarding faith and works. For we may look at other people and proclaim:

They do not do enough good deeds in my eyes their faith is dead!

This of course relates to judging someone else's faith. If I don't see what I determine to be good works in those around me, their faith is dead.

What a terrible state to be in, here instead of condemning myself, I'm condemning my neighbour and not based on God's measure of faith or good works, but almost always based on either the works I do or what I perceive to be good work.

The solution here is again to look to our Saviour, who suffered and died not for the worthy, but for the unworthy. Just as we look to our Saviour when we see our own deeds are failing, we should let our Saviour's works be good enough to overcome all of our judgments of other people's failings.

There is still another error:

I've done enough good deeds, my faith is sound, I'm safe!

This is obviously works righteousness. I have saved myself. Faith here is not in the Saviour but in my ability to carry out his commands. This is the faithlessness of the Pharisees, who refused to see their own sin by setting their bar just low enough that they could jump over, but just high enough that no one else could achieve it. It almost always goes together with condemning others while excusing myself.

But we are not saved by works, we are saved by faith. Our trust is not in our own ability but in Jesus Christ's ability to save us.

If you find yourself claiming, 'I'm a good person', and trusting in your own goodness, you've fallen for this error. But Jesus doesn't leave you in your errors, he has come to show you your own sin so that you will see your own need for a Saviour and turn to him and trust his works for you. Because he has done enough, and more than enough to bring his forgiveness and salvation to all the earth, even to you who think you don't need it.

Error one leads to despair, and errors two and three lead to pride and often come together. But none of these errors leads to Christ, nor to forgiveness, or to eternal life.

Last week I used two articles from the Augsburg Confession to help us understand original sin. It just so happens that two of the next three articles deal with faith and works. Article 4 states:

¹ It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, ² when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.

³ For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5.¹

Christ does all the work, as he does for the Syrophenician woman, and the deaf man in the gospel, he has come to save us as Isaiah promised he would. Jesus is the reason the Psalmist can say

³ Put not your trust in princes,

in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

⁴ When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;

on that very day his plans perish.

¹ Tappert, T.G. ed., 1959. *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press.

⁵Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord his God, ²

Jesus has done all the work to save us, and our good works pale into insignificance. If we trust in our works, the works of those whose breath departs and we return to the earth, we are trusting in things that will perish as will we. But we are called to trust in our Saviour, Jesus Christ the only true son of God who gives to us his forgiveness, mercy and eternal life that he won for us on the cross. That is where we place our trust.

So what do we do with good works? The Confession of Augsburg answers this question for us in Article 6 titled 'The New Obedience':

¹ It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded, but we should do them for God's sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God.

² For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness through faith in Christ, as Christ himself says, "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants' " (Luke 17:10).

³ The Fathers also teach thus, for Ambrose says, "It is ordained of God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved, and he shall have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit."³

As James points out, the fruit of Abrahams's faith was that he was willing to sacrifice his own son because his faith said God could and would raise him from the dead. So he was not afraid to heed God's command. The fruit of Rehab's faith was that she was willing to assist the spies to escape her corrupt government. The fruit of the Syrophonician woman's faith was that she was willing to ask Jesus to cast the demon from her daughter, even though she knew she did not deserve it, and in the face of Jesus' reluctance and testing was willing to accept even but a crumb of Jesus' gifts. The fruit of the deaf and mute man's faith was to beg Jesus to help him.

Last week we talked about our hearts being changed when Christ comes to us with his forgiveness, namely in baptism, the absolution, at his altar and whenever we hear his spoken word and forgiveness proclaimed. In restoring us he gives us new hearts. The old, cold, dead heart in us either wants to do good works to earn salvation or wants to do evil because we hate God, usually both at the same time.

² Anon, 2016. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

³ Tappert, T.G. ed., 1959. *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press.

But the new heart, Jesus' heart, the heart that is forgiven and free, springs to life and wants to do good works. Good deeds are inevitable because the new heart is set free. The new heart no longer has the burden of sin, it no longer has the need to earn freedom from God, Christ has given all this as a gracious gift. The new heart is free to serve and love those around him, to really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," and do it very well.

This is not because the new heart can now earn merit, or has ceased to be sinful, but because the new heart is Christ's heart. The heart that went all the way to the cross and into death to love his neighbour. This is the new heart that Christ has given to you in your baptism, that he restores with endless repetition as your sins are forgiven in the absolution, and that he refreshes and strengthens each time you take his body and blood on your lips.

So we are left asking, what are the good deeds that need to be done?

Luther wrestled with this question and found such a simple answer. There were many in his day who claimed that there were extra special and spiritual deeds that we could do. These were found in the so-called holy orders of the priesthood or the monastic life, even in pilgrimages and paying indulgences. But the good deeds God requires of us are much simpler than that. From the fourth commandment in the Large Catechism let Luther explain:

¹¹² ... notice what a great, good, and holy work is here assigned to children. Alas, it is utterly despised and brushed aside, and no one recognizes it as God's command or as a holy, divine word and precept. For if we had regarded it as such, it would have been apparent to all that they who lived according to these words must also be holy men. Then there would have been no need to institute monasticism or "spiritual estates." Every child would have remained faithful to this commandment and would have been able to set his conscience right toward God, saying: "If I am to do good and holy works, I know of none better than to show all honor and obedience to my parents, since God himself has commanded it."⁴

In the same way, Luther takes each of the commandments and shows us what simple and good works are found there for us to do. Commandments 1-3 relate to trusting God, and commandments 4-10 relate to loving your neighbour. The most faithful thing we can do, the deed (if you want to call it that) that demonstrates the greatest faith is to desire and act on Jesus' promise of forgiveness and come and hear it! (3rd commandment)

Since James brings up the commandment regarding killing let's go there in the small catechism. We are going to hear it with Pastor Sam's additional explanations:

We should fear and love God, (*that is our faith should have us do this*) and so we should not endanger our neighbour's life, nor cause him any harm, (*it is a good*

⁴ Tappert, T.G. ed., 1959. *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.*, Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.

deed to retrain ourselves and not kill or hurt our neighbour) but help and befriend him in every necessity of life.⁵ (it is a good deed when we help our neighbour in his body and life)

Good deeds are not extraordinary acts of service, like joining the ministry, taking a vow, being an overseas missionary, extended fasting, or great acts of piety (although some are called to these vocations, they are not extra special spiritual deeds) – good works that flow from the gospel are to simply keep the commandments, to do what they command with joy. To love your neighbour as yourself.

Original sinners with new hearts will do good deeds, so as God's forgiven people you are free to serve him as you serve your neighbour with all your deeds of thankfulness.

Amen

The peace of God that surpasses all our understanding keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.

⁵ Tappert, T.G. ed., 1959. *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.*, Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.