

Trinity 19

(from MP Lesson for Thursday)

For my text today, I turn to the Morning Prayer lesson for this past Thursday from the Epistle of St. James:

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

If we recall from today's Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul tells us to put off the old life, and put on, clothe ourselves, in a new life; put off sin, and put on the righteousness and holiness that God can give through his Grace and Love.

And he goes through a long list of things that a Christian must abandon, such as: falsehood and deception; anger, bad temper, and irritability; thievery and dishonesty; foulmouthed speaking; and any other acts that will grieve the Holy Spirit.

Paul pretty much tells it like it is, and what is the expected behavior of a Christian.

When we turn to the Gospel passage for today from St. Matthew, we see Jesus performing a miracle that served to prove not only his claim to be the Son of God with the power to forgive sins, but also to prove that by his taking on humanity through the Incarnation, he had not ceased to be God.

The underlying tie to both the Epistle and Gospel is Faith: Faith in the power of Jesus Christ to forgive us of our sins, and to heal us physically and spiritually.

Our relationship to God is based on Faith, an expression of the power of his Grace and Love in our lives.

That Faith and that Grace and Love cannot be contained within the Christian heart but must find expression.

So, we turn to the Epistle of St. James to come to some understanding of how God's Grace and Love, through Faith, are expressed in our lives.

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?

Here lies the answer, found in the often disputed concept of *Works*.

That verse, from the second chapter of the General Epistle of St. James is one of 13 that address the relationship between Faith and Works. In those few verses, St. James puts the issue into proper perspective for all time.

What is that perspective and what is the relationship of Faith and Works?

In reading St. James' Epistle, one may be struck by his argumentation on the inseparable relationship of Faith and Works, especially in view of St. Paul's often misunderstood position on Faith, and the even greater emphasis that has been placed on Martin Luther's words that we are all saved by Faith alone.

Let me read to you a few of the verses from St. James:

Verse 14:

What doth it profit, my brethern, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

And verses 17 and 18:

Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

Yea, a man may say, Thou hath faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works.

Faith and Works. Can there be Faith without Works? Can there be Works without Faith? St. James says the two can not be separated. This point Luther failed to fully comprehend as he sought to discredit the Epistle of James.

Even throughout the history of Judaism, the principle of Faith shown through Works is evident. James uses two examples to illustrate his point.

The first is Abraham, who acting upon his great Faith in God, was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. This willingness was a Work of Faith, for if Abraham had not been willing to offer Isaac in keeping with God's command, it would have been an indication that something was lacking in his Faith.

Importantly, it was Abraham's Faith, not his Works, that justified him in the sight of God. His Works gave proof of that Faith or substantiated his Faith.

The second example which James uses is that of Rehab. Rehab was a harlot who lived in Jerico. When Joshua sent two spies to the city, Rehab hid them and helped them escape over the wall at night. For this, Rehab was spared when the city was taken by the Israelites.

It was not Rehab's Works that saved her; it was her Faith in God that was proved by her Works, that is, hiding the two spies despite the peril to her life by the rulers of Jerico.

We may find some difficulty in visualizing the principle of Faith shown through Works in the examples provided by James; however, since James wrote his Epistle, there have been many hundreds, even thousands, of examples of this religious principle.

While the Protestant Reformation, with the resounding words of Martin Luther that we are saved by Faith alone, served to de-emphasize Works as an integral part of Faith, we have seen in modern times, many examples of those whose good Works simply flow out of Faith in God and our Lord Jesus Christ. One such example was Mother Teresa.

Now, what is most striking in reading the passage from St. James is that he is talking about what I call, *living the Faith*. Quite simply, just as our bodies without a spirit are dead, so Faith without Works is dead. Faith may be all that is necessary for salvation but can it really save us if it is a dead Faith?

It is Works that puts life into Faith, just as the spirit or soul puts life into human bodies.

Works are the reality of Faith. William Barclay, in his book **The Letters of James and Peter**, said:

No man will ever be moved to action without faith; and no man's faith is real until it moves him to action. Faith and deeds are opposite sides of a man's experience of God.

The greatest challenge of any generation is living the Faith. Certainly the pressures from the world today are no greater than they were two thousand years ago; yet, with the growth and development of the Church, and the refinements and advances in society, the tendency to separate Faith from the everyday activities of life remains.

For this reason, James speaks directly to us today through his Epistle. However conflicted we may be in our lives, James tells us that our real strength comes from a living faith in Jesus Christ, and *that* Faith is manifested in our deeds and actions in the world.

True Faith changes our entire life and cannot be hidden.

While there are many opportunities in the world today to bring to fruition our Faith through action, Faith still remains the essential element in salvation. It is expressed, though, in activities of daily life producing the fruits of the spirit which St. Paul described as *love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control*.

Moreover, what James is emphasizing does not put him at odds with Paul. They are, in essence, approaching the same focal point from different directions, and neither disputes the other.

For Paul, adherence to the Law could not make up for lack of Faith. Whereas James is simply saying, don't abuse Faith by doing nothing.

To paraphrase James:

...what use is it for a man to say he has faith when he does nothing to show it? Can that faith save him?.... if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing.

The greatest means whereby we may express our Faith through works is by willing obedience to our Lord's commands, indeed, the two greatest commands of our Lord: to love God, and to love our neighbor.

Putting our Faith into action is not complicated. It can be just visiting someone in the hospital or making a telephone call to check on someone. It is, quite simply, the giving of one's self.

While great things may be done through monetary donations, greater things still are done through personal involvement, as our Lord himself demonstrated.

From a purely humanistic standpoint, what made Jesus so revolutionary were his works of Faith. Jesus touched people. He touched those considered unclean; he touched sinners; the poor; the sick; and even the dead.

He went against all social and religious convention.

In a sense, we are much less constrained today, in that so many stigmas have been removed over the centuries enabling us to reach out to all estates of men, just as Christ would have us do. Again,

....what use is it for a man to say he has faith when he does nothing to show it? Can that faith save him?.... if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing.

Faith and Works. Yes, we are saved by Faith alone but the evidence of that Faith is shown through our Works, Works that emanate from the heart, Works that we are compelled to do. If those Works are not present in our lives, can we say truly that we have a living faith?

If our faith has not produced good Works, is it not time for us to discover within ourselves a way to put our Faith into action, to bring it to life? From within our own Parish, our own Family in Christ, and throughout our community, opportunities abound to live our Faith through Works.

Faith, Works, and something else — God's Love and Grace. Our Faith, our Works, are the result of our having freely accepted God's Gift of Grace, given to us through his Divine Love. It is through his Grace that we have Faith and it is through his Love expressed in and through us that we are able to express that Faith through our Works.