

Pastor Joe Polzin
 James 2:1-10, 14-18
 “Living Faith: Faith Works”
 Year B – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 September 9, 2018

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

Today we begin a four-week sermon series that will walk us through the book of James. James speaks very practically how a Christian is to live out his or her faith. The title of our series is “Living Faith,” and today we focus on chapter 2: “Faith Works.”

Our series begins this week addressing about a problem that that plagues Christianity today, something quite serious that threatens our faith. And it’s not an external threat. It’s not coming from other religions, or the government, or our society. It’s internal. It’s right here, within this church, and within ourselves. It’s called “partial Christianity.”¹

Partial Christianity is where someone lives with each section of their life completely separated, with no overlap or connection between the different parts. It’s where a Christian is convinced that their faith only applies to a small portion of their life, and has it quarantined from the other portions. Their faith as a Christian is separate from things like school, business, politics, or even family. Let me share with you some statements, and listen if they sound familiar:

“My faith is my Sunday life. It doesn’t have much to do with my Monday through Saturday.”

Or, “I don’t want to pressure my kids into their faith, so I’ll let them decide for themselves when they grow up.”

Or, “We watch shows based solely their entertainment value. I’m able to keep separate real-life from what I see on TV.”

Or, “I invest in businesses solely on their profit-making capability, not in regard to anything else.”

Or, “Religion has nothing to do with politics, they should be completely separated. My faith doesn’t direct the way I vote.”

What each of these statements indicates is a belief that not only does our faith not impact the other parts of our lives, but also that we as human beings are capable of dividing the different sectors of our lives. That we aren’t comprehensive creatures in body, mind, and soul. But it’s not true, even though our modern culture will try to tell you that it is. You can try to live in this divided fashion, but then there will be a disconnect between all the different areas of your life, and eventually something will suffer. Something will give.

And in the case of Christians, when there’s a disconnect between faith and works, between what we are taught by the Spirit and what we do in the world, it’s our faith that suffers. And if we persist like that, if we reject the guidance of the Spirit, then it’s our faith that will give. And that’s not to mention the effect it has on those around us, when they see that what we profess on Sundays never carries over to our lives the rest of the week.

But this problem of partial Christianity isn’t a new problem; it’s only manifested itself in different times. In fact, this problem is quite old, as old as Christianity itself. It’s the problem that

¹ Term from Robert Benne, *Reasonable Ethics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 125-129, as quoted in the Lutheran Study Bible.

James describes when he writes in our Epistle Reading about faith and works. But before we dive into that, we should know a little bit more about James.

The author of the book of James is not the James who was one of Jesus' disciples. Rather, he is the James who is referred to multiple times as the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3, Gal. 1:19). But before you think James used this as a mark of honor for himself, we don't need to look any further than John 7 to see that while Jesus was walking this earth, his brothers didn't even believe in him (7:5).

It wasn't until after Jesus rose from the dead and showed himself specifically to James, his half-brother, that he believed (1 Cor. 15:7). And this humility is hinted at by James himself when he opens up his letter by saying, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). He doesn't make mention of his relationship to Jesus by family, but rather places emphasis on his relationship to Jesus by faith.

Of course, James is also well-known for being the leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem as recorded in the book of Acts And Galatians. He is mentioned several times as the person whom Paul sees when he goes to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the Church began. And until the Church was convinced they were supposed to minister to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, when they would send Paul as their missionary, Christianity was very much limited to converted Jews in and around Jerusalem. In fact, in our Epistle today, when James describes the Christian "assembly" (2:2), the word there is actually "synagogue." The earliest Christian Jews still met in the traditional Jewish meeting places.

This and other evidence leads us to believe that James, the leader, the pastor of the Jerusalem church, wrote his book very early on, somewhere ten to fifteen years after Jesus' resurrection. In fact, it's reasonable to assume that the book of James was the very first book written in the New Testament. Which means, that when James is addressing the problem of partial Christianity, as we call it, a separation of faith and works, he's speaking in the first early years of the newly formed Church. And so this problem that still faces us today is as old as Christianity itself.

Now, let me address an important elephant in the room. For a long time, and even still today, people read the Apostle Paul, who says, "We are saved by grace through faith" (Eph. 2:8) and they read James, who says, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead," and they pit the two against each other. This was true in the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. When the Lutherans were proclaiming the Gospel that we are not saved by our own works, that we are saved by Christ alone, by grace alone, by faith alone. But their opponents used passages like this one from James to stress that at least some level of human cooperation was needed to be saved. So, does that make us uncomfortable with what James has to say?

The answer is not at all. In fact, our own Lutheran Confessions, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, spend multiple paragraphs defending James chapter 2 as proper and right teaching. James is not contrary to the Gospel. And James and Paul are not speaking against each other, they are speaking from two sides of the same thing. They both speak about faith, and then they both speak about what follows faith for a Christian, which is works.

That we as Christians are saved by grace "through faith," as Paul says. "And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). We receive salvation and are justified not by anything we do, but solely because of what Jesus did; namely, that he died on the cross to forgive us our sins, that he rose again to give us new life, and that he sent us his Holy Spirit, delivered to us in Baptism, to regenerate our hearts, giving us faith to believe in him.

But then what? Well, let's stay with Paul. The very next verse after he says our salvation is not a results of our works, he says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Paul and James agree. We are not saved because we do good works. We do good works because we are saved.

Many people think Martin Luther had a problem with the book of James, but he only really had a problem with those who would misuse what James wrote to contradict the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After all, Luther himself wrote, "Faith is a divine work in us, which transforms us and gives us a new birth from God. . . . Oh, it is a living, busy, active, and mighty thing, this faith; it cannot but be ever doing good. Faith does not ask if there are good works to be done, but has done them before one can ask and is ever a-doing."

For Luther, and for all of Scripture, faith, true faith in Christ and in all he has done for you will naturally result in doing good works. Not good works that you plan and think about and assume they're earning you salvation. As Luther puts it, you've done the good works before you even can think about it. And this is where the series title comes from, "Living Faith." It has a double-meaning. We are granted living faith by Jesus through the Holy Spirit living in and regenerating our hearts. And we are living out our living faith, by his power, each and every day through our works.

And this gets us back to the issue of the day: that faith and works go together. First comes faith, and then works. First comes justification, and then sanctification. They are two distinct things, but they cannot be divided. You can't live as a partial Christian. That's what James is talking about when he says, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (2:17-18) A Christian can't have works without faith, and can't have faith without works. You can't live as a partial Christian. We are whole people, and when we have faith, it will show in who we are and what we do.

So, what works does a Christian do? Well, everything you do is done as a Christian. Think back to those opening statements. Our faith will impact how we live as students, as business people, as retirees, as citizens, and as family members. It affects all our God-given vocations, not just on a Sunday morning, but every moment of every day. It would be better put, what works *doesn't* a Christian do?

James does give us three examples specifically in this passage though, which we can consider. Probably all three were specific examples of issues that he witnessed in the Jerusalem church. The first was the sin of partiality. People were so caught up with a person's status, as determined by their wealth and the clothes they wore, that they would give a rich man the best spot in the synagogue. But when a poor man walked in, they had him stand in the corner or sit in the least honorable spot on the floor.

But that's not how it works in God's kingdom. God has chosen the poor in the world, He has chosen everyone who is poor in spirit – that's all of us – to be rich in faith. He calls all people without exception to have faith in His Son, Jesus. He shows no partiality, therefore neither should we. Especially not based on superficial things like status and wealth. We should treat all people as God does, with equal amounts of love and charity. James says, "If you really fulfill the royal law [the law of God's kingdom] according to the Scriptures, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well" (2:8).

The second and third examples of works we do as Christians go together. James says, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that

faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and 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?’ (2:14-16) I don’t know about you, but this one is so direct, it cuts my own heart pretty quickly. As we’ll find in the coming weeks, James has a way with words that is very simple, yet direct and powerful.

And James says a Christian who is motivated by their faith can’t ever let a person go without something they need for the body, be it clothing or food or shelter. Our words that sound so grand in church about how we love God and love our neighbor mean nothing if we turn around and knowingly allow such a person in our lives to suffer. We are always to be thinking of others as better than us, that they are worthy of our effort, our time, and our resources. Not just for our friends, but for every person we meet.

And this call to living faith is a radical call for two reasons. First, because it shows quite clearly that no portion of our lives should ever be separated from our faith. That there is no room to be a partial Christian. If we are to be concerned, as James tells us, with how our faith would lead us to do things as simple as providing clothing and food for someone else, then would it not also make sense that our faith would affect every decision we make? That every aspect of our lives would be informed by who we are as children of God, and what Christ has done for us? That the faith, which is living in us, would lead to us to live out our faith?

The second reason this call to living faith is radical is that it can result in things quite ordinary. It looks like treating people with love, clothing the poor, and feeding the hungry. This calls to mind the words of Jesus himself, when he was talking about his return on the Last Day, and what he will say to those he gathers at his right hand: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matt. 25:35-36). Of course, the righteous ask when these things happened; they don’t remember seeing Jesus. And Jesus responds, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (25:40).

The living faith given to us by God isn’t limited to what looks like big and bold actions for God, that a good work isn’t good unless we’ve converted hundreds of people. Living faith doesn’t necessarily mean we have to be missionaries to foreign countries, as we heard Martha Mahlburg speak last week, whose family *is* called to a foreign country. For the vast majority of us, living faith means God will lead us to do simple things in the places where He has us.

He has prepared good works for you to do, right where you are, in your vocation as church member, community member, citizen, husband, wife, parent, grandparent, child, student, and neighbor. You can serve people where you are, and love them. And in a world that can’t comprehend such a thing, in a world that loves to separate people into classes according to wealth and status, and in a world that encourages you to live with all these divided sections of your life, living as a “partial person,” as “partial Christian,” something as simple and comprehensive as loving your neighbor will astound the world.

Now, when we fail, when we attempt to separate our faith from our works, which we are all bound to do many, many times, we repent. We turn to Jesus, and ask for forgiveness, trusting in faith that we are forgiven freely by him. And the Holy Spirit, working living faith in our hearts, will once again lead us to live out our faith, by our works, for the benefit of all those around us. *Living Faith* means *Faith Works*. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**