

Text: James 2:8-10, 14-18

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. . . What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

Perhaps you have heard or read that Dr. Martin Luther didn't think much of the Letter of James in the New Testament. As far as Evangelical or Gospel content, Luther said, "St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw . . . for it lacks this evangelical character." (Quoted from Plass, "What Luther Says.") So Pastor, why is this sermon on James? Why are you feeding us cheap hamburger when the Scriptures contain so much filet mignon? As a matter of fact, Luther later changed his tune about the letter of James. While it may not be as rich in speaking about Jesus and our salvation as some other books, he agreed that it is a letter totally consistent with the rest of the Bible and absolutely belonged in the list of Bible books.

So what turned Luther off initially? We have all learned the verse, *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)* That's been burned in our brain - *not by works, so that no one can boast.* Just ask anyone who's been in confirmation class in the last few years how many of the questions in the worksheet are designed to make you sensitive to recognizing that we're saved not by what we do, but what Jesus has done for us. So now James comes along and writes, *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.* Perhaps our reaction is similar to Luther's first reaction - these passages seem to contradict each other!

But if we take a simple step back and look at the whole Bible, we recognize that God's Word to us is complete and clear and does not contradict itself in any part. That leaves only the possibility that our own understanding of God's Word is imperfect or incomplete, which leads us to that great Lutheran question, "What does this Mean?" In this letter of James, God explains what He means when he says:

Faith Without Deeds Is Dead

- 1. Dead faith does not fulfill the law of love.**
- 2. Living faith proves itself in deeds of love.**

1. Dead faith does not fulfill the law of love.

The Bible makes it very clear that the kind of faith for which God is looking is not something that we manufacture ourselves in our heart of hearts. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14)* We do not have the capability of comprehending what God has done for us. Rather, as we heard a minute ago, *[faith] is a gift of God, not by works. . . (Eph 2:9)* So the very first characteristic of faith is that it has its source in God. **It's a gift.**

Secondly, **faith has an object** which is very identifiable. While I cannot look into your hearts to see for sure if you have faith in Jesus, I can very clearly see that you all have great faith in something - you have faith in the church pews. You do not have worried looks on your faces that your pew is going to collapse. You all look relaxed and are sitting comfortably, perhaps even with your legs crossed. That's not how someone sits if they expect their seat to collapse at any moment. The object of your faith that causes you to sit is clearly the pew. The object of your faith in God is clearly Jesus. Your confidence about a long-term home in heaven is based on the Good News that Jesus lived a perfect life which He gave you as a free gift. Your confidence in forgiveness is based on the sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus which demonstrates and guarantees the fact that God has settled your account with Him with a huge

stamp of approval which says, "Paid in full."

So **faith has an origin** - it's from the Holy Spirit – and it has an **object** - which is our Savior Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that faith also has results. St Paul writes, *[Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:14)* In other places, the Bible calls these good deeds "*fruit of faith.*" Jesus himself said, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)*

In short, faith has an **origin**, an **object**, and it **bears fruit**. James writes, *If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.* James makes it as clear as he can that any claim to have faith must be accompanied by actions – by fruit. In fact, he goes a step farther and labels such lack of fruit for what it really is – sin. If an apple tree fails to produce apples, you really don't have an apple tree, do you? It may have the same trunk and branches and maybe even the same leaves as a real apple tree. But without fruit, it's worthless, it's not even deserving of the name "apple."

Obviously, there were those among the original readers of James' letter who had a problem with this issue of faith and deeds. There were those who called themselves Christians and surely wanted others to call them Christians, but to the careful observer, they didn't look like Christians because there was no fruit of faith. Any time they failed to follow what James calls the "Royal Law," summarized in Jesus' words, *"Love your neighbor as yourself,"* they were showing themselves to be fruitless trees. A particular problem identified in the early verses of this lesson was a tendency to show favoritism toward those of wealth or position in the congregation. The question, "What can they do for me?" was always asked before "What can I do for them?" "That's sin!" James is saying to them. Real fruit of faith will treat and regard all brothers and sisters in Christ as equal, regardless of status or wealth.

Maybe showing favoritism is not a huge problem among us. Maybe sometimes it is. But I guarantee that there are many violation against Jesus' mandate to *"love our neighbor as ourselves."* Jealousy, greed, fouled up priorities, and insensitivity all cause us to sin against one another. Each time we bring our heavy load of sin and guilt to Jesus' cross, we can leave them there and go away knowing we are forgiven for Jesus' sake. But God wants more for us and from us until the next time we come carrying our sins. He wants us to live! He wants us to really live! He said, *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)* Jesus wants to see in us a living faith, a faith that proves itself in deeds of love.

2. Living faith proves itself in deeds of love.

So what does a living faith look like? James addresses that in the lesson. *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. (James 2:14-18)*

We all know what it means when we say that someone is full of a lot of hot air. It means that they sure know how to talk the talk, but they can't walk the walk. When all is said and done, a lot more is said than done. James points out that there is a danger of being full of hot air in the Kingdom of God. He uses an example that may well fit our day as well as his day. Someone is living in poverty. It could be a neighbor or even a family members, but either way it is a fellow Christian. We see them regularly, feel bad for them, maybe even visit them and leave with the nice but hollow wish, *"Be warm and well fed."* Just so much hot air is what James calls the situation. While we might want these Christians and the others around us to think that we're acting in a truly Christian way, there's a problem – no fruit on our faith. And since faith always produces fruit, it points to an even bigger problem. No fruit, no faith.

There are a lot more kinds of fruit of faith beside feeding and clothing the poor. There are some very basic fruits of faith. It would seem to me and agree with the Bible that some of the basic fruits of faith are these: praying, reading and hearing God's Word, using regularly the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, bringing our children to Holy Baptism, thanking God for his blessings. I'm not intending that to be a complete or exhaustive list. But those are things that Christians do.

So what conclusion do we come to if we don't see any of these fruit of faith in a Christian? We are taught to be charitable, to 'take our neighbor's words and actions in the kindest possible way,' to give those we love the benefit of the doubt, and to be patient. We might conclude, "they're just going through a phase," or "they'll do those things when they get older," or "maybe I just don't see them do those things." Or, we might conclude with James, "*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*" Ouch! That hits pretty close to home, doesn't it? Suppose you know CPR and find a person lying on the ground with no pulse or heartbeat. What will you do? Will you say, "I hope someone finds you quick." or "I wish you well in your time of difficulty?" Or will you administer CPR or call 911 as quickly as you can if you don't know CPR?

Those are easy decisions. They are matters of life and death. My question then, is why is that such a hard decision when it comes to dealing with the spiritual lives of our family members or our church members? Sometimes it's not hard to conclude that there is no apparent fruit in a person's life even though they regard themselves as Christians. James doesn't say, "Chop off the dead wood and stack it up to be burned." He says, "Recognize that the person who was a believer but has no spiritual vital signs might be dying – or dead." Now is the time to perform spiritual CPR, not at their funeral. Now is the time to take the risk of straining the relationship so that the relationship can continue in eternity!

And James even suggests a way to approach these people. *But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. (James 2:18)* He's not suggesting that we engage someone in a theological and theoretical discussion about faith and deeds. He's suggesting that we approach the situation by saying, "I'll show you mine and then you show me yours" – your fruit of faith, that is. Our example of fruit on our faith can be a powerful witness to those around us. We live in a culture that more and more wants us to compartmentalize our lives – a Christian part and a secular part. That can't happen. That doesn't work. And James tells us why.

Dear friends in Christ, it is vital to live our lives for Jesus in plain view of others. *Jesus said, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)* Faith and deeds go hand in hand. The "faith alone" that the reformers talked about is not in conflict with the fruit that faith naturally bears. May God move us to live out our faith every day and to encourage one another to do the same.

Amen.