

## **Faith & Works**

Theology Thoughts: Part 2 “Faith & Works”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – October 1, 2023

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**Readings:** Romans 4:1-12; James 2:14-26

**Reflection:** Psalm 1

**Greeting:** Make your ways known to me, Lord; Teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth. Because you are the God who saves me. I put my hope in you all day long! Praise the Lord!

**Prayer:** God, bless us this in both our words and our actions. Help us to not just to be hearers of the word, but doers also. Help us to listen to your word and guide us in your ways. May you help us to slow down so that we may love our neighbor and may show our love for you. Grant us wisdom that we may learn the lesson you have for us today. Let us walk in your truth that we may share that truth with the world. We thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness. By your Spirit help us to help one another. We pray that you will continue to help us grow in mercy and grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 1

*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous, for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 1, and we hear of holding fast in God’s ways. That we are called to both know what God calls us to in faith but also to act on that faith. What are some ways that you have demonstrated your faith in Christ? How have you loved your neighbor this week? What are some ways that you may act on your faith in God in the week to come? What are some ways that you could reach out to help someone in need? How can you share God’s love with the world? How may we join together to share the comfort and care of Christ?

**Prayer:** Lord, we turn to you because of your steadfast love. We know that even when we struggle you are with us. May your Holy Spirit guide us in truth and light. Help us to share the peace and love of Christ each and every day. As we come before you this day, we bring to you the joys and concerns of our lives that we have shared aloud together. We also turn to you in prayer with the unspoken worries and celebrations of our lives. Help us that we walk in your

ways and seek the path of righteousness. May you be with us to strengthen us in our gladness and our sorrow. We pray that you will help us to grow in love through our laughter and our tears. As we learn more about you, Lord, may we grow closer to you. May your steadfast love and faithfulness guide us all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Romans chapter 4, verses 1 through 12.

*What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David pronounces a blessing on those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." Is this blessing, then, pronounced only on the circumcised or also on the uncircumcised? We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Romans 4:1-12 NRSV\*)*

Our next reading for today comes from James chapter 2, verses 14-26.

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith apart from works, and I by my works will show you faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is worthless? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and by works faith was brought to completion. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (James 2:14-26 NRSV\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week's thoughts bring us to a topic that has caused a lot of confusion over the years. The conflict even caused some to feel that one of our readings should have been left out of the Bible completely! It all comes down to the relationship between faith and works. Or, if you need a different wording, how our beliefs interact with what we do. Now, you might have noticed that Paul and James seem to have opposite opinions at first glance. Paul talks about the importance of faith alone and speaks against thinking our works earn salvation. In Romans, Paul says we cannot simply be justified by works but that it comes by faith. Paul uses a very specific quote about Abraham as an example. He backs up what he says with Scripture. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." For Paul, this verse is evidence that backs up his theological concepts of faith. We might be tempted to say that Paul had backed up his statement with Scripture, so this is now a settled matter. Faith alone is the way to go, case closed. Except that James seems to be leading us in a different direction completely. James tells us that faith is meaningless without works. That our deeds matter, so much so that faith without them might as well be dead. What does James use to backup this assertion? Abraham. You might see where this is going. What part of the Scriptures does James quote about Abraham to back up this theological claim? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." James believes that this shows that it was what Abraham did to show his faith in God that really mattered. This is used to show that works are needed for faith to have any purpose or meaning.

You can see where the problem comes in. Paul says that it is faith and not works that are important. James says that it is works that matter if we are going to have faith. These have to be opposite ideas, right? They have to be in conflict. And if they are in conflict, only one of them can be right. And we are left with an issue that theologians have wrestled with for a long time. Which one is more important? Is it faith or is it works? And this is an easy trap to fall into, thinking that we have to pick one over the other. The thing is, I don't think we have to pick. You might think I'm crazy. If they are saying opposite things, how can you not choose? And there we find the crux of my argument. I don't think they are saying opposite things. I think they are saying the same thing but in different ways. I think they're talking about the same thing in different ways. Paul's focus is on the faith element of things. That without faith we end up following our own selfish desires. That we can't earn our salvation through what we do. But Paul is not saying that our actions are meaningless. There is a distinction we need to draw from what Paul is telling us. Paul is saying that our actions should be guided by faith and not thinking that we earn God's love through what we do. He's also saying that we need help to be delivered from sin into a life of righteousness, that we don't earn it through the law. Often when Paul talks about works he mentions works of the law. Paul argues against the law being the way we are delivered and that it is through faith in Christ alone. For Paul, the main thing he is arguing against is people who claim that performing works of the law is enough by itself, in essence earning salvation. It isn't something that you are owed but is a free gift of faith. So,

how do we reconcile this to James? The first thing to notice is that James isn't speaking of the same thing.

I'm a big fan of James. The theology of James has been a big part of how I have developed my own faith. James presents faith in a way that I connect to easily. Because I always think about my faith as the way that I live and not just what I think. James has been very influential in the development of my personal theology. James is speaking about faith in a very different way than Paul. He isn't talking about the works of the law as a means of justification. He is not arguing a position that would be the opposite of Paul at all really. We often read those into James when we discuss faith and works because we begin with Paul's position and then look at James through Paul. Instead, if we look at James directly, he is dealing with a very different aspect of faith. Paul was dealing with the law while James was dealing with inaction. We hear about how faith is not simply a mental exercise where we develop our beliefs and that is enough. James shows that faith has to produce faithful actions if it is going to be genuine. You can't say that you believe in Christ unless you can show it. Saying the words doesn't do anything that actually shows your faith. James highlights this rather well, and in a way that I don't think contradicts Paul. Paul argues for much of the same thing that James does, because Paul also talks about how followers of Christ should behave. He just addresses it from a different perspective. Paul thinks about faith as it relates to the law. James thinks about faith as it relates to how you live. James points out that your faith has to be reflected in your actions. That you can't just tell someone who needs clothing to stay warm. You can't just tell someone who is hungry to have a nice meal.

With this, I think James touches on a major problem we face today. If there's one thing that I see all the time on the news and on social media when something bad happens, it is thoughts and prayers. This seems to be especially prevalent when it is an issue that could have been prevented. There is always someone offering thoughts and prayers, but nothing more. I can't help but hear James every time I hear thoughts and prayers being offered. You've offered your thoughts and prayers, but what have you done to make them reality? Have you acted on them at all? And this is a major problem because people see all of the thoughts and prayers, but they also see all the inaction. And it damages the church because it makes it seem like the church simply doesn't actually care. If you are praying for somebody, you should also think about what you can be doing for them. Because even if we don't know what to do, we can offer our support. Because that's a way to love our neighbors and a way to support them in their need. It is an action based in our faith, and that is our works. We must act if our faith is genuine.

One more interesting thing to look at is the fact that Paul and James are both able to cite the same Scripture about Abraham. It shows that Abraham had faith and that he acted on that faith. It is Abraham living his faith that it is reckoned to him as righteousness. Because everything that Abraham did required him to act on his faith through his works. But it wasn't the works themselves, but that the works demonstrated his faith. We see the interconnectedness between Paul and James because of the common usage of Abraham here. Paul sees

Abraham and sees the importance of his faith. James sees Abraham and sees the importance of Abraham acting on his faith. What we can see is that our faith is important so that we don't lose sight of what's truly important. We can see that it is important that we act on our faith so that we can live a faithful life. We don't earn salvation through our actions, but our actions are how we demonstrate a life in Christ. That if you believe in Christ, you live a life in Christ, and it's reflected in what you do. We see it in the way we help those in need and stand up for what is right. We can see that they really don't contradict each other but look at faith and works from different perspectives. And when we can see that they are talking about the same kind of faith, it lets us see them in harmony.

That is important because when we see them in conflict, we feel we have to choose one over the other. Instead, we can read them as two people talking about the same thing using different language. This makes my lesson today twofold. A big lesson today is the importance of our faith in guiding us in our lives. That our faith needs to be an active faith reflected in our actions. That saying "Jesus is my Savior" doesn't mean anything if you do not live a life that reflects it. That you should have your faith guide your actions and not expect your actions to earn God's love and grace. That the gifts are freely given, and our faith is how we show acceptance of those gifts. That when we live a life in Christ, it is reflected in what we do and why we do it. That we have both faith and works. What do we do? We love God and we love our neighbor through our actions. Why? Because our faith calls us to that love. Our faith requires our actions and our actions require our faith. The other lesson we learn is that we can miss what others are saying if we cannot allow ourselves to see things from different perspectives. Because we could all too easily say that only Paul could be right or only James could be right. And we do the same thing with the people around us. If I have learned anything from studying Paul and James, it is that it is too easy for us to pick a side instead of learning to communicate. So, I pray that we think about the words we use and how we use them. I pray that we let the Spirit guide us so that we think about how our words may be interpreted by others. And I pray we find the wisdom to try to understand other's thoughts better so that we can understand each other better. Because when we can understand each other, we can love each other better and love God deeper. Because then it shows that we follow Christ by our faith and works. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Our Current Series – Theology Thoughts**

Our current series is going to be a collection of theology thoughts from Pastor Cameron. Each week we will explore different aspects of how we live our faith. We will be looking at faith, prayer, works, forgiveness, scripture, and more. The more we learn about God, the more we grow in faith and love.

**Next Week:** On Forgiveness – Our next message will look at both seeking forgiveness and granting forgiveness, and seeing how they are related.

### **Prayer List**

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup	Ambulance Crew	Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown
Marsha Overton	Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox
Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuiness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	

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