

Dear members and friends of St. John,

From James, Chapter 2: *"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,<sup>16</sup> 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?"<sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."* (vv. 14-17, ESV).

**"Faith alone!"** That's the **cry of the faithful Lutheran** when asked what saves us from eternal damnation. We learned from our confirmation days that **good works can never satisfy the requirements of the Law**. In short, **nothing** that we do on earth will count toward our entrance into heaven. Only faith saves, and this *faith* is something that is **gifted to us from above**.

Then, **what are we to do with the above text?** We know that all of Scripture is breathed out by God, and is useful for our instruction and life (2 Tim. 3:16). Doesn't St. James **deny** the claim that it is faith alone, when he writes, *"faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"* (v. 17)?

The short answer is that **James does not contradict our understanding** of what gets us to heaven when we die. Dr. Martin Luther addresses this in his study of **vocations**.

A **vocation** is any and all relationships with other people, where **good works** might be carried out for their benefit. If you're married, you have the vocation of spouse. If you have children, you have the vocation of parent. As a Christian, you have the vocation of brother or sister in Christ. You can see where this is going – student, laborer, volunteer, friend, neighbor, grandparent, etc., all fall under the heading of vocation.

Luther goes on to say that **we live in two kingdoms**. The first is **the kingdom of the right**. This is the **spiritual kingdom** that can only be realized through **faith**. Faith allows us to say that Jesus Christ is Lord! We believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose again on Easter, for the forgiveness of "my sins" (and the sins of all mankind). Note that **works have nothing to do with this**. We didn't earn faith (in other words, we didn't do something worthwhile on earth that forced God's hand in giving us faith). No, faith came to us when **we were spiritually dead** (Ephesians 2:1-8). In the twinkling of an eye, we suddenly believed in Jesus.

The second kingdom is **the kingdom of the left**. This is **the earthly realm** where **our neighbor lives**, and where **we carry out our vocations**. This kingdom is ruled by law. Here, works reign supreme.

**Many Lutherans imagine that the spiritual kingdom (right) is all that matters to God.** After all, eternity in heaven is far more important than our short time on earth. So, with sinful human reason, many **compartmentalize their Christian faith** into a few hours a week. "I go to church. That's all that God demands of me, right? For if He demands more than that, He's making works out to be necessary for salvation." This sounds solid.

The problem with this line of thinking is, that, **when saving faith comes to us, it changes us in profound ways.** Luther says that the most important change is **our new capacity to love others.** To quote Dr. Luther here, "Therefore faith forever justifies and makes alive, but it does not remain alone, i.e. idle...but it is incarnated and becomes man, that is, it does not remain idle or devoid of love." Luther goes on to state that **love and faith cannot be separated – they go together.**

**As we work in our vocations** (i.e. serving others), **this deeper love from above** motivates us and moves us to **do good things.** We become "little Christ's" to our neighbor. Now, we can see how James' words ring true... "*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead,*" simply means that **saving faith will always be accompanied by love of neighbor; this love produces 'good' works.** More profoundly, these are the 'good works' that God has created for us to do on earth (see Colossians 1:9-10). **Sin** will certainly taint all of our good works, and yet **God uses even these tainted works for His good purpose.**

James also implies that **faith may end up "dead."** How can this be? Luther said that faith and love are inseparable; therefore, **faith and works are inseparable.** This points to **a dangerous condition:** faith that is *so* weak, that **love for neighbor is practically non-existent.** When a Christian gets to the point of saying, "I go to church. That's all that God demands of me," and then proceeds to be **so self-centered** that his week is full of **nothing but self-pleasing activities** (in essence, "It's all about me!"), **can faith be real?** There's a point where **"faith" can be nothing but a "shell":** head-knowledge about Jesus without any noticeable sacrificial love exhibited toward one's neighbor.

**The answer to weak or non-existent faith is God's means of grace: His word and sacraments.** *More* than worship is needed here. **Daily Bible study becomes critical.** When opportunities arise where **you can use your gifts and talents to help someone beside yourself and immediate family,** these

should be thought of as **opportunities to carry out the good works that God has for you to do. Look for the lonely, hurting or suffering** (how about sharing a Portals of Prayer devotion with a lonely neighbor, or someone in a nursing home?). The opportunities are **endless. Get off the couch or put the fishing pole down, and serve God by serving others.** Remember that **God has a plan for you** – a plan that involves good works during this short life, followed by an eternity with Him in heaven. **Thank God that He has gifted you to serve others!**

Pastor Travis