

“Faith and Works”

Luke 10:38-42, Romans 3:20-24, 28, 31, James 2:14-18

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Faith and works. Throughout the history of the church, it's been an issue that has played a major role. And so, I thought it would be fun to go on a bit of a journey through the history of the church this morning. I know, you might not use the word “fun” when describing a journey through church history, but I just did, and if that makes me a bit of a church geek, I guess I'm okay with that!

For the first fifteen hundred years or so after Christ died, the Christian church in the western world was essentially one. But around the 16th century, a group of reformers took issue with some of the doctrines and practices of the church, and launched what is called the Protestant Reformation. One of these reformers was a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther.

One of the main issues that Martin Luther had was with the Roman Catholic theology of faith and works. The teaching of the church at the time stated that faith alone cannot make humans right with God. Faith alone couldn't do it, but faith that is active in charity and good works could. So it took both faith and works for people to be justified before God.

Well Martin Luther got to reading his Bible, and the book of Romans really captured his attention. Among his reading were some of the verses we read today, including statements like “we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”¹ At the same time, Luther looked at a practice of the church called “indulgences” whereby people could obtain good works, which would gain their salvation, by donating money to the church. What it basically boiled down to was that people were essentially thinking that they could buy their way into heaven.

Luther couldn't reconcile his reading of the Bible with this practice of the church, among others, so he documented his displeasure with the teaching of the church in the form of 95 theses and, as legend has it, nailed them to the front doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He was eventually excommunicated from the church and began the Lutheran church. At the same time, other reformers were challenging the established church and starting other denominations as well.

Now let's fast forward a couple of centuries to 18th century England and let's focus in on a priest of the Church of England named John Wesley. John was an avid student of the Bible, and was well versed in the writings of the major theologians throughout the ages. As a part of one of the non-Roman Catholic denominations, Wesley truly believed in the teachings of Paul that said faith was the only thing necessary for salvation. However, Wesley also couldn't overlook that troublesome book from the back of the New Testament called “James.”

¹ Romans 3:28

Martin Luther really wrestled with the book of James throughout his life, even calling it an “epistle of straw” at one point. Luther was just too concerned that James promoted the concept of works-righteousness. Let’s listen again to what James wrote to see if we can hear why Luther would have a problem with it.

James writes, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 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 your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”

As a part of our seminary coursework, we were given an “ecumenical context” requirement to take at least one class at one of the other two seminaries in Columbus, Trinity Lutheran seminary at Capital University or the Pontifical College Josephinum, the Roman Catholic seminary north of I-270 in Worthington. I took one class at both schools, and both were outstanding experiences.

My class at Trinity Lutheran Seminary was a Bible class on the book of Genesis, but at one point the professor asked the class to comment on what the book of James would say to an issue we were talking about. As with many questions professors ask, you could hear crickets when he was done with the question. Nobody wanted to say anything. The professor said, “Come on, I’m sure you’ve taken your New Testament class, what did you learn there?” One of the students said, “We didn’t focus much on the book of James.” I decided this was the time to have a little fun, so I raised my hand with a smile and said, “As the only United Methodist in the class, I can tell you that we’re familiar with the book of James up at Methesco!”

Now I include this story in my sermon not just to poke some good-natured fun at my Lutheran friends, but to point out what I honestly feel makes us kinda different as United Methodists. You see, Wesley really strove to find the middle ground between faith and works, and was comfortable holding the two concepts in balance.

Now Wesley was a very practical theologian, and had some trouble with how some Christians at the time were practicing their faith. You see, some Christian groups had taken the “faith alone” view to the extreme, saying that as long as they had faith, they didn’t have to pray, worship or even read the Bible. These were just the kind of folks James was calling out!

Wesley held strongly to the reformation view that it is faith alone that makes us right with God and leads to eternal life, but faith should not be alone. His thinking is documented in two of the historic documents that United Methodists hold as doctrine within the church.

Article X of the Confession of Faith of the former Evangelical United Brethren church is titled “Good Works” and says this: “We believe good works are the necessary fruits of faith and follow regeneration but they do not have the virtue to remove our sins or to avert divine judgment. We believe good works, pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, spring from a true and living faith, for through and by them faith is made evident.”²

Similarly, Article X of the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church is titled “Of Good Works” and says this: “Although good works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and spring out of a true and lively faith, insomuch that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree is discerned by its fruit.”³

So what does this mean for us today? I think the question we need to ask ourselves is, just what is the underlying issue when we talk about faith and works? If the underlying issue we’re talking about is salvation, being right with God or inheriting eternal life, the answer is clear. Faith alone is what is necessary. Our works will not achieve salvation.

However, if the underlying issue is what is important to live a Christian life, I think the answer is equally clear. Both. A Christian life includes both faith and works. Philip Yancey, in his book on prayer, wrote, “To [simply] pray, ‘God, please help my neighbor cope with her financial problems,’ or ‘God, do something about the homeless downtown’ is the approach of a theist, not a Christian. God has chosen to express love and grace in the world through those of us who embody Christ.”⁴ In a sense, what he’s saying is that faith alone is simply a form of theism or belief in God, and it is not necessarily Christian. We may believe in God and in Jesus Christ, but we are not acting in a fully Christian manner until our faith is transformed into action and we become the body of Christ for the world.

An anonymous writer in the 1970’s wrote, “I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. Thank you. I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar and prayed for my release. I was naked and in your mind, you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless and you left me alone to pray. You seem so holy, so close to God. But I’m still hungry and lonely and cold.”⁵ Our Christian faith leads us not simply to be concerned about these things, but to actually do something about them. That’s what keeps Christ alive in the world today.

Like Mary and Martha, each of us is probably naturally oriented more toward faith or more toward works. But I’m the kind of person who dislikes extremes, and I believe you

² “The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church” (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004) p. 69.

³ “The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church” (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004) p. 61-2.

⁴ Philip Yancey, “Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference” Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006, p. 244.

⁵ The Ritz Collection, Eric S. Ritz, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, from esermons.com, 0-0000-0000-28.

can go too far either way. On one extreme, you could be like those folks during Wesley's time and say all you need is faith, while neglecting any works, even prayer, worship or reading the Bible. On the other extreme, you can think that all you need to do is be a good person, taking care of others, and you don't need to really believe in God or in Jesus Christ at all. When Jesus was asked what was most important, he reminded us of the two-fold commandment, love the lord your God with all your heart, mind soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Philip Yancey also wrote in his book on prayer that he receives a newsletter from The Center for Action and Contemplation. The founder of the center says, "I have often told folks that the most important word in our title is not 'action' nor even 'contemplation,' but 'and.'"⁶ So, in living the Christian life, what is the most important thing to remember about faith and works? The and.

⁶ Philip Yancey, "Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference" Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006, p. 125.