

1-18-09: Is Faith Enough?

On Thursday I attended a required meeting for Probationary Elders. Along with the general preparation for ordination, our meetings always include some sort of training. This time we reviewed some of the changes voted at General Conference. Along with "our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service", we will, hereafter, promise our "witness." We are to *do* what we believe. What an innovative idea! Yet it seems odd to me that this has to be said, let alone professed as a covenant to God. Before we can review the challenge of faith...

There are three questions I'd like to pose: 1) Who or what inspires our "works"?; 2) What does our relationship with Christ accomplish?; 3) What is the purpose of our works?

First: Acts 1:8 says ...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

One day a disciple receives one million dollars as a gift, designated to help those in need. The disciple is thankful for the gift and begins to make plans for a ministry. A year goes by, and the Gift-Giver returns, asking, "Tell me how you used your gift to serve God. Have people come to know God through your efforts?"

Confused, the disciple asks, "what gift?"

But as the words leave her lips, the disciple remembers the large sum of money she'd placed in a bank account. Due to the concerns and challenges of daily life, she'd forgotten about the gift.

Disappointed, the Gift-Giver says, "I gave you a gift to help other people. When you received the gift, you also accepted the responsibility for sharing your gift with others. The gift is still there. Go and use it as intended."

Acts 2: 1 & 4, tells us that in Christ we witness our faith because we are filled with the Holy Spirit. God gives this priceless gift of Himself to energize our walk of faith and to offer His presence to work through us to serve others.

Second. Galatians 5:13 says, "for you have been called to live in freedom - not freedom to satisfy a sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love." Said a different way, in 2 Corinthians 3:17, "...wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, he gives freedom." So what should we accomplish for Christ? This becomes a critical question of faith.

In Christ we have been set free from the power and penalty of sin, free from trying to earn God's favor, free from the insatiable need to please ourselves, and free to know the truth. Even though we may not be aware of all these freedoms, they are nonetheless true and available to each of us by faith.

Still the question remains, what do we use our freedom for?

Notice the things we have been set free from, they all revolve around the self - around me! Most of us have spent the better part of our lives in self-seeking efforts, getting the attention we thought we deserved. Think about it. The guilt, self-pity, and regret we love to wallow in are always with us. Imagine freeing up the time we usually put into self-indulgence for *prayer*, imagine that instead of judging others to feel better by comparison we might spend quality time *studying* His Word, imagine the time we waste feeling the sting of self-pity, instead we could invest in a self-less effort to *assist* someone else; just imagine, word, study, action.

We need to remind ourselves of the freedom we enjoy in our relationship with Christ, because forgetting that truth is what gets us stuck in the first place. Then use your freed-up time to identify with what someone else is going through and plan how to serve them, instead of yourself.

If being free to serve sounds like an oxymoron, it's only because we have all become so used to not being in control of our lives that we can't imagine this

form of freedom. Yet being free to serve is what we were made for. This is how we become useful to God as the "Body of Christ."

Next time you become absorbed in you-know-who, stop and think about what you can do for someone right next to you. Remember that your freedom in Christ promotes action. You might even ask others what they need, then offer in love. It's time for someone else to get our attention, for a change.

Third. Ephesians 6:7 asks us to work wholeheartedly, as if we were serving the Lord.

What if everyone worked with Jesus in mind? Suppose no one worked to please themselves or the bottom line, yet everyone of us worked just to please God.

Many occupations would cease to exist including: drug trafficking, theft, prostitution, other similar efforts. Certain careers, by definition, cannot please God.

Certain behaviors would stop as well. If I repair a car for God, I'll not overcharge or cut corners. If I paint a wall for God, I wouldn't hear, "re-paint, re-paint, and thin no more!" Imagine if everyone worked for an audience of One. Every nurse, thoughtful. Every Emergency Worker, careful. Every Teacher, insightful. Every Salesperson, pleasant. Every Lawyer, skillful and truthful. Everyone, honest and straightforward.

Impossible? All we need is us - you, me - to start the revival. It might as well start right here in Lake Pleasant and Speculator.

So now we can acknowledge that the Spirit is the Gift-Giver who inspires us, that we live in a new freedom to accomplish the works of Christ, and that our works are intended to serve God, now we're ready to mine James, chapter 2.

During the time of the Reformation, one issue that was hotly contested was whether a person is justified by faith or by works. Catholics emphasized James 2:24, which states that "a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone," while the Protestants responded with Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:28,

according to which "a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith."

Which is it? Are we justified by faith, as Paul says, or by works, as James says?

James was concerned about people who accepted Christian doctrine as true but who did not live accordingly. He wrote that "even the demons believe..." Paul, on the other hand, was worried about those who thought that if they followed the law, they would automatically be acceptable to God. Of course, right standing before God results neither from believing the right doctrines nor from going through the right motions.

It's fine to perform good works, but that will not earn a person right standing before God, since the Lord is not interested merely in whether we do good deeds. He wants to know *why* we are doing these things. Is it in order to look good? Is it so that other people will think highly of us? Is it in order to escape punishment? Do we engage in them so that others will be indebted to us and we will therefore have a measure of control over them?

Or, when we do what is right, is it because, more than anything, we want to do the right thing? Is it because we love the Lord so much that we desperately want to please Him above all else? The reasons for our actions are extremely important, even more important than the actions themselves. God is interested in our inner motivations. Why do we do what we do? We often don't even know the answer to this ourselves.

By the same token, it's fine to have faith, but what is the nature of that faith? Is it merely an acceptance of truth? Is it only an acknowledgment that miracles are possible, or that the Scriptures are true? Or is it a love for Jesus Christ, prompting us to be pleasing to Him in all of our thoughts, words, and actions?

During the Reformation, both the Protestants and the Catholics were wrong. The Protestants were wrong when they implied that merely by believing certain propositions we would be justified before God, and the Catholics were wrong when they said that simply by obeying the commandments we would be just. Neither is sufficient. The thrust of the entire Bible is that it is our inner motivations, attitudes, thoughts, and desires that are either pleasing to God or

disgusting to Him. If we are humble and repentant, He will lead us into all truth. If we sincerely desire to do the right thing because it is the right thing, then we will automatically begin to follow the law. If we conform to outward obedience without any deep desire to please God, then it is a waste of time. On the other hand, we can agree that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world, and even for our own sins, but if we do not order our lives accordingly, then we are neither righteous before God nor pleasing to Him.

We often think that the motivations for our actions are pure, when they are actually far from it. This is why the law is so important. Whenever we fail to conform to God's commandments, it helps us to realize that something is wrong--that maybe we are not the models of virtue that we thought we were. We are thus confronted with a brutal and startling reality of our own wickedness, but it is important to acknowledge our nature. This is why James said that we are justified by works, and not by faith alone. He meant by this that we can have all of the faith we want, but if we are not conforming to God's standards, then we really aren't the good people we thought we were. Our actions against God's word should startle us into seeking God and asking Him for inner integrity. If it were not for the existence of the word of God as an objective standard, it would be very easy for us to get complacent, thinking that we are without any faults, and in no need of any improvement in character.

On the other hand, there is another form of complacency which rests assured that, because we are following the commandments we are in God's good graces. We must not be concerned merely with appearances. This is why Paul said that we are justified not by works, but by faith alone. We can do all of the good works we want to, but if we have false attitudes or improper motivations, then we are hypocrites, and we are only pretending to have faith in God. It is only true faith that justifies. We can only have right standing before God when we are motivated in what we do by a true love for God, desiring with all of our hearts and minds and souls to do what is pleasing to Him.

When we find that we have ignored God's rules and that we are therefore not the good people we thought we were, or, on the other hand, when we find that we are not ignoring those rules but come to realize that our reasons for being good are suspect, then, in either situation, we are presented with a tremendous

opportunity. God is able to change us. As we repent before Him and ask Him to show us those areas in our lives that need to be rectified or justified, He will do so, and, in the process, He will produce the necessary changes.

Those who engage in this process are said to be justified by faith, for by faith we appropriate God's power to do this, made available to us through the blood of Jesus Christ. And when we appropriate God's grace in this way, we begin to do the good works without which no one can be justified.

We are being renovated. He is in the process of taking us in our fallen-ness, and completely realigning our spirits, so that our motivations, our hopes, our dreams, our ambitions, and our priorities might conform to what He had in mind when He created us. This is not something to be postponed until the end of our lives, or until the end of the age. It is dangerous to procrastinate in our cooperation with Him. There's a growth process involved in the Christian life. Remember what was said last week, "God loves me just the way I am, but so much so, that He doesn't want me to stay that way."

There is a sense in which God now views us as perfect, in light of the end of that process, but it is a process, and moment by moment. He offers to us the privilege of responding to His call to blamelessness, by the power of His grace working within us. This is why Paul wrote that we are justified by faith alone, and not by works. Yet, as we have seen, the faith that justifies is never alone. It is always accompanied with actions of goodness which are a natural outcome of justifying faith. This is why James states that we are justified by works, and not by faith alone.

But strictly speaking, we are justified neither by faith nor by works. Rather, it is God who makes us righteous. He does so by miraculously working within our hearts and minds so that we are motivated to love Him, and to love His qualities of virtue, integrity, self-sacrifice, and self-lessness. When we love Him, and His qualities, it motivates us to yearn with all of our hearts to emulate them. And as He works this desire into us, our response is to ask Him to give us the strength to do these things. Then, when He grants us this strength, we use it eagerly in order to think as He thinks, and walk in His ways, moment by moment, day by day.

In and of themselves, neither faith nor the good works can rectify us. Only God can grant us the desire to walk with Him and the strength to do so. We can rely neither upon faith nor upon works for justification, for God alone is our salvation.

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NIV Bible