

24th Sunday OT Year B
September 12-13, 2015

Faith without works is dead.

Readings: Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8: 27-35

We are privileged to hear from an extremely important book of the New Testament today, the Letter of James. Each time I visit someone in order to celebrate the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, the opening prayer directly references this epistle, the primary source for this beautiful sacrament. And today, we gain insight into an important relationship between our faith and our works, a relationship that sadly, is too often misunderstood.

Far from merely theological disputes, during the 16th century, some broke full communion with the Catholic Church over differing interpretations of the Bible on this very passage. Martin Luther wrote a preface to the Epistle of James, claiming that it “contradicts Paul by teaching justification by works.” He also called the Letter to James “an epistle of straw” compared to [St. Paul's letters] for it “lacks this evangelical character.”

This contentious historical dispute was tragic, especially since much of it has to do with context. It may *seem* like St. Paul says something different in another book of the Bible, but the context was different. For example, in his Letter to the Romans, Paul indeed wrote: “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.”

Aha! There you have it, right? A contradiction? Actually, not at all. Paul was writing to a church in Rome struggling with a prominent first-century heretical sect that taught that belief in Christ was not enough- the people also needed to continue to follow the Mosaic Law. In no sense did Paul say that works are unnecessary. He specified ‘works of law’ because these were the works without which the heretics were claiming one “cannot be saved.”¹

¹ Cf. Tim Staples, “We Can Work it Out,” *Catholic Answers Magazine*, vol. 20, n. 8.

There are many issues about which there is a deeper divide than this today, including issues about the sacraments, papal authority, and increasingly, those of a moral nature. But faith and works?

The *Council of Trent* states: “We are said to be justified by grace because nothing that precedes justification, whether faith or works, merits the grace of justification.”² Our faith teaches us that “Justification is the *most excellent work of God's love* made manifest in Christ Jesus and granted by the Holy Spirit.”³

Thus, in our Catholic understanding even the beginnings of our faith proceed from a movement of God. It's not our doing. St. Paul stresses that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, not merely by obeying the Mosaic Law. Perhaps you have heard the classic slogan stating that we are justified by ‘faith alone.’ But the expression ‘faith alone’ only appears once in the Bible—in this very Letter of James 2:24— but here it is rejected.

Biblical faith is not just belief. It is surrender. It is a complete entrusting of oneself to God in Christ and acceptance of His power, His will, and His plan. If we truly say ‘yes’ to Him and allow His grace into our hearts, we’ll never be the same. His love begins to work through us and change our lives. James *does not see anything lacking* with the faith he is discussing. The *faith* part isn't the problem; it is the ‘*alone*’ part that became the problem.

We can never “earn” salvation by our own good works; nothing we do is “repaid” by God in a strict sense.⁴ So on this crucial issue—justification (and ultimately salvation) by God’s grace through Christ (Rom. 3:24)—Catholics and most other Christians agree, and agree wholeheartedly.

² Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, #8.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #1994

⁴ Rom. 11:35, Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 2007.

However, we Catholics acquire more righteousness by doing good works with the help of God's grace (Phil. 2:12-13, 1 Cor. 3:9). Our good works count for something, and they contribute to our justification (Jas. 2:14-26) and our sanctification.

Good works are worthless for salvation without God's grace, but **within** God's grace they are precisely what God intends for us to do with our lives (Eph. 2:10).

William Shakespeare wrote: "How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world."⁵ Our good works are a way of showing faithful gratitude to God, for God Himself has made possible our good works in the first place (Jn. 15:5).

Bl. Mother Teresa spoke often about the importance of good deeds done with love, urging us to "Make all your life something beautiful for God." What a gift and what a grace to be able to do this. Didn't our mothers teach us to do a good deed every day? We would do well to heed their advice. They knew what they were talking about.

⁵ William Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice," Act V, scene 1.