

James 2:1-10, 14-18
"Show Me Your Faith"
15th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18B)

September 5, 2021
First Ev. Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro – Partial Christians]

Too many of us are partial Christians. As "partial" Christians, our Christian convictions only apply to a small part of our life – and for many, that portion is shrinking.

We see this often in our personal and public lives. We may say – or hear fellow Christians – say things like:

- "Due to my faith, I am personally opposed to abortion, but I think women should have the right to choose."
- "Religion and politics must be kept separate."
- "I can believe in evolution and still be a Christian."
- "My religious faith should have nothing to do with how I vote."
- "I know Jesus is the only way to salvation, but I don't want to offend people by talking about Jesus."

Our modern world tears us apart. The modern world separates our lives into independent sectors: Education is education, politics is politics, science is science, and so on.

Our history has been a long story of each sector declaring its independence from the control and presence of religion. There certainly has been some good through secularization, but this process has had its costs: we are no longer whole. We often are forced to become partial Christians.

Our modern world also breaks us apart as we no longer trust in the mystery of God's presence and His action. Instead, we live our lives reduced to a series of causes and effects that science can describe and predict. Thus, our lives become increasingly *this-worldly*. We focus on today, but not eternity.

Religion, itself, has become increasingly individualistic, as well. Instead of attending a Confessional and Christ-centered church, many people choose churches that adhere to their personal thoughts and feelings, instead of a church that adheres to God's Law and Gospel. We see this within our own family and friends.

If anything, many people would rather have a "god" who fills in the gaps. So, whatever cannot be understood by science and human reason, then "god" fills in those parts of our life.

Partial Christians believe Christianity only applies to only small parts of their lives. In doing so, they are succumbing to the compartmentalized secular world.

Today on this 15th Sunday after Pentecost, the Triune God – *the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* – teaches us that we ought to live out the whole Christian faith in our daily lives.

[Sin of Partiality]

Due to our sinful nature, we are a partial people. For good or bad, we care how people look, dress, and speak. We even tend to divide people by age and skin color. Through the Holy Spirit, James teaches us that partiality has no place in God's Kingdom.

James writes: "***My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory***" (James 2:1).

James then cuts to the core. You see, our sinful nature likes shiny things, rather than dull things. Our very eyes catch the costly gold ring and fine clothing, and we think, "This man must have money. Come on in. You are welcome here."

Some time ago, I experienced this at a department store. Now, I never dress shabby, but I noticed a change. After eating at a nice restaurant, I walked around a fancy department store wearing a suit, tie, and dress shoes. While there, I was certainly noticed by the staff. They wanted to assist me everywhere I went. On other times, when I wore only a polo, I was not even noticed. When it appeared, I had money to spend, I received all the help a man could ever want. But when it appeared I didn't, I was ignored.

Through the Holy Spirit, James is saying that showing partiality is indeed a sin. To the rich man in fine clothing, we may say ***“You sit here in a good place,” while [we may] say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there,’ or, ‘Sit down at my feet’*** (James 2:3).

The fine dressed man receives all the attention, while no respect whatsoever is shown to the poor man. The poor man is just told to sit over there, as far from us, on the floor. No one would ever think of treating the rich visitor in this way. This is the point James makes. Instead of respecting people as equals, James’ hearers were only following evil worldly ideas.

James’ point is that his readers should have shown courtesy to every visitor without making distinctions. He says: ***“Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”*** (James 2:4)

Is the soul of the one worth more than the soul of the other? Are not all men, rich and poor, equal in the house of God? Something is really wrong here with the faith of these people. They are fine attending church services – *sitting in the pew, singing hymns, and going through the motions* – meanwhile, they are judging each person around them. They are hearers only and not doers of the Word (James 1:22).

So, James reminds them about fulfilling the royal law: ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”*** (James 2:8b). If the Christian is doing this, they are doing well. ***“But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it”*** (James 2:9-10).

[Faith Without Works is Dead]

James then cuts deeper into the core. This sin of partiality is a faith issue.

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (James 2:14)

Typically, “faith” usually means trust – a dependence upon something. But that is not what James is saying here. When James says: ***“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”*** he is referring to “faith” as a mere knowledge of a subject.

Satan and his demons most definitely believe in Jesus. But they do not trust in Jesus. Or if you ask a random person, “*Do you believe in Jesus?*” A “yes” to this question only answers the fact that they have knowledge in Jesus. This is not the same as trust.

This is what James is saying. He is discussing a false understanding of faith: faith that is just mere knowledge that has no effect on the person who has it.

Faith itself cannot be seen. Faith makes its presence known by a proper confession and through natural works.

This is exactly what Jesus taught! He said: “***You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits***” (Matthew 7:16-20).

So, if there is a man who declares that he has “faith,” but everyone sees, that his “works” do not belong to such a faith, this man has no such true faith. So, if a man says, “*My Christian faith has nothing to do with how I live my life*” or he says, “*Due to my Christian faith, I am opposed to this or that, but I will not withhold your right to do what you want*” then this man may not be a Christian. There are no fruits falling from his supposed faith. Or, what if a person devoutly attends Sunday church services, but acts like a heathen the rest of the week?

The question James issues is this: “*Is that faith able to save?*” That answer is: No. True faith in Jesus Christ certainly saves, but a fruitless faith does not save. To this, through the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, James says to us: Show me your faith!

Now, you may be thinking, does this align with our favorite Lutheran verse from the Apostle Paul: “***For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast***” (Ephesians 2:8-9)? That answer is: Yes. Sometimes we forget what follows those verses: “***For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them***” (Ephesians 2:10).

James and Paul have exactly the same conception of saving faith. We are indeed justified by faith without works of the Law: a true and living trust in the Savior Jesus Christ.

You see, Paul does not have in mind one kind of faith when he says that faith without works saves, while James has in mind another kind of faith when he says that without works faith does not save. Both Paul and James refer identically to the same kind of a faith, and they both attribute to it regeneration, justification, and salvation.

Now, Paul and James do deal with different kinds of works. Paul deals with works of Law with having nothing to do with true faith, which are the boast of all the Pharisees and all works-righteous people, who think they are able to save themselves by such works. Now, trust in works of the Law is the direct opposite of faith in Christ alone. Works alone in order to earn salvation do not save.

James, here, deals with gospel works – *the fruits of our faith* – which is the evidence of the presence of true faith.

Both James and Paul attribute salvation to a living faith. Paul roots out what destroys and excludes faith. James stimulates sluggish faith. These two are in perfect agreement! They both call for the fruits of faith!

“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17).

What good is a dead tree? What good is a dead branch? What good is a tree that does not bear fruit? They are worthless. They are thrown into the fire and burned.

“But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18).

So, the absence of good works that flow from faith in Christ show that this “faith” is not genuine. This person has a false faith. He has the same faith as that of a demon, who certainly believes in Jesus, but will not trust in Jesus and follow Him.

[The Whole Christian]

So, how do we protect ourselves from being a partial Christian? How do we become a whole Christian? God gives us the answer!

True faith is the product of God through His Means of Grace. ***“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ”*** (Romans 10:17). Therefore, if we have no constant life in God’s Word, we cannot have true faith. Jesus says: ***“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the Vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing”*** (John 15:4-5). But when we are in His Word by hearing His Word, receiving God’s forgiveness through Absolution and the Sacrament of the Altar, God strengthens our saving faith. We also grow in true faith when we have an active life in Bible Studies. You see, God strengthens our faith through Word and Sacrament! The Triune God does all the hard work! True faith receives salvation.

True faith is also always productive. Good works are those which the Word of God commands, describes, and effects through us. If we claim to have faith, but have no good works, that claim is a lie. Good works are loving our neighbor. Good works are living out the Christian life.

True faith is what draws us to the Triune God: redemption.

We are all poor, miserable sinners. But God did not leave us in this state. God the Father showed His steadfast love to you and me by sending His Son Jesus Christ to take on all of our sin and replace it with His righteousness. This Christ accomplished through His atoning suffering and death, so that by grace through faith in Christ alone, we would receive forgiveness of sins, which leads to eternal life and salvation.

Christ has come to redeem, forgive, regenerate, and fulfill all His promises. So, trust in Christ and cling to Him! Show your faith in Him! It is only through clinging to Christ and His love for us that we live the whole Christian life as we love God and serve our neighbor in repentance and true faith. Amen!

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠