

November 26, 1978
Romans 5:1-5; James 2:18-26 (NE)
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FAITH AND/OR WORKS

This sermon, like some others I have preached in the past, has been inspired and motivated by a letter I recently received from a college student. This particular student grew up under the influence of dedicated and theologically liberal parents, and a theologically liberal minister. Now he finds himself in an environment pretty much dominated by Calvinistic conservatives. One might in this case even say ultra-conservatives.

His letter asks, "Do you have any suggestions as to books and literature I could use to show that I am not alone in my beliefs, not just making up my own religion? Do you think it is worth the effort to continue participating in these discussions, or do you recommend that I give up?"

Sincere and honest discussion of a subject such as religion is always worth the effort. The only difficulty is that when two people discuss such a subject from highly divergent points of view, the chances are that neither one is listening to the other. There is much more concern for conversion than for enlightenment. While one is talking the other is probably marshaling his arguments for the rebuttal. To have a valid and worthwhile discussion demands open-mindedness, a willingness to hear the other point of view, and, of course, in a Christian context, it should be designed to enlighten in a spirit of good will, not to browbeat and dominate. In the Gospels one never finds Jesus trying to ram his doctrines down the throats of his listeners. He sought rather to win them with love and example.

Well, my young friend went on to describe to me the areas of disagreement and heated discussion; such subjects as Biblical infallibility, predestination, the incarnation, grace, original sin and free will. On each of those subjects one could of course preach many sermons and write many books. Then he tossed to me, "the final problem", as he put it, the relationship between faith and works. I quote from the letter itself in which he reports his religion professor's point of view. The professor argued,

"... To the liberals, faith makes absolutely no difference and can even detract from works or man's ultimate justification... The liberals place all emphasis on works since they feel that works are the only thing that count in God's eyes."

I don't know what liberals that professor has been talking to lately, but certainly to none that I have ever come across. No Christian leader, conservative or liberal, has ever, to my knowledge, denied the importance of faith. The statement is a bold misrepresentation and it therefore becomes the main subject with which I wish to deal for the remainder of our time this morning.

II

Let me briefly describe for you the life of a well-known Christian. He was a brilliant student who had a great talent, perhaps a genius, for music. He studied music for many years and became an expert on organ construction. He also became a famous organist. He turned his back on all that and went to medical school because he felt compelled to minister to the needs of black people in Africa. He left the honors that could have been his in Europe, went to Africa and started a hospital where he spent most of the rest of his life healing the sick and ministering to the minds and spirits of all who came to him.

There is no denying the good works of that man. But what would you say about his faith? If you were acquainted with the New Testament book of James, would you not immediately quote the passage, "Show me your faith without your works and I will show you my faith by my works." And would you not cite also the words of our Lord, "By their fruits you shall know them." He didn't say, "By their faith you shall know them."

Of course, the man I was describing was Albert Schweitzer. He was a Lutheran, so it is possible a Calvinist might not like him even if he admired his works. But could a man do the great work that Schweitzer did without possessing a strong and vital faith in God?

Martin Luther called the epistle of James "an epistle of straw" because much of its emphasis is on works. I am not aware of what Calvin called it. No doubt something not very complimentary. But one must put their words and the attitude of Luther in a proper perspective. In his case he had been a first-hand witness to the passion of some of his fellow Roman Catholics to collect and venerate relics of Jesus--pieces of the cross, the little finger of a dead saint, etc. He had seen the emphasis on the buying of indulgences. He had reacted strongly against all of these kinds of works, and from our modern Protestant point of view, rightly so.

But there are other kinds of works. Is not prayer and devotion a work of the spirit? Certainly nothing is more necessary to the Christian life. It is prayer that develops and nourishes our faith. Dare we look down on these works?

Paul said works were important because they demonstrated the faith. They were the fruits of the spirit. "The fruit of the spirit is love and joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." (Galatians 5:22).

Are works important? Jesus thought so, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) Peter thought so. He wrote in his epistle that the followers of Jesus should set a good example so that others, "may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God..." (I Peter 2:12).

And so we liberal Protestant Christians do believe in the importance of works. Perhaps some of us over-emphasize them, to be sure, but we know that a faith without works is dead. (James 2:17). We also know, however, with the author of Hebrews, that "without faith it is impossible to please God." (11:16). And so, it is not a matter of either/or but a matter of both/and. Faith and works must go together, and if faith is real and genuine it will always manifest itself in good works.

This is the very reason why Christianity has done so much to heal the wounds of the world, why it generated a worldwide missionary enterprise, why it has built orphanages, hospitals, colleges and all the rest. Faith without works is dead.

Dr. Marcus Bach tells a story which demonstrates the consequences of indifference and apathy which is born of a belief in the foreordination or predestination of things as they are. Says he,

"Once in Beirut there was a shipwreck not far from the harbor. The report spread through the city that help was needed. I ran toward the scene of the mishap and in trying to take a shortcut, lost my way. Breathlessly I paused to ask directions of a Moslem who sat in his doorway reciting words from the Koran over a string of beads. As he quietly gave me the directions I asked him patiently, 'Aren't you coming along? People may be drowning.' The man shrugged his shoulders and said, 'It is the will of Allah', and went back to his beads, which on the Moslem rosary number 99--each a symbol for one of the 99 beautiful names for God."

Faith without works!

Thomas À Kempis was a monk who died over 500 years ago. He wrote a book, The Imitation of Christ, which has been a religious classic ever since. He was a man of great faith as is demonstrated in his writing. His primary work was the book he left behind. It has inspired millions of men and women for over half a millenium. In that book he wrote these words:

"Surely great words do not make a man holy and just; but a virtuous life maketh him dear to God. . . Truly at the day of judgment we shall not be examined as to what we have read, but as to what we have done; not as to how well we have spoken, but as to how religiously we have lived."

III

One final and important word. Arguments and debates about religion are from one point of view a testimony to the importance of religion in the life of mankind. Men and women must have some kind of faith or life is empty. Because we fear that emptiness, we often tend to find a faith and cling to it, refusing to examine it or question it, fearful that if we do so it might be found wanting and we be left without anything to hang onto.

Indeed, that can happen. But it is also true that just as the unexamined life is not worth living, the unquestioned faith can often be not worth having. It is a pretty weak and powerless thing if it can't stand honest questioning.

During the past week we have seen what a dogmatic, close-minded, narrow and unquestioned religious faith can sometimes do as we have witnessed the terrible tragedy in Guyana, South America. It is but a repetition of previous and similar tragedies--the Spanish Inquisition, Calvin burning Dr. Michael Servetus at the stake, the American Colonists drowning women supposed to be witches, all done in the name of God and in the name of true religion, but all horrible and grisly to contemplate. All done in the name of him who epitomized the love of God and who is known as the Prince of Peace.

To assume that we have the final word of God is not only extremely dangerous, it is, for us Congregationalists at least contrary to a basic principle for we adhere to the word of John Robinson, pastor of those hardy men and women who were to become the passengers on the Mayflower; "God hath yet more light to break forth out of his holy word."

We are searchers, pilgrims, adventurers on a spiritual way which is not always crystal clear, but which we trust will lead us eventually to the side of Him who is indeed the Ultimate Truth.