

“Deeds of Faith”

My father was a United Methodist minister. He loved to play church softball. When I was about 8 years old I began going to some of the games with him. He could pitch and was a pretty good hitter, although I thought it odd that he batted left-handed even though he was right-handed. I later learned the concept of a switch hitter, that some could swing the ball from either side.

I noticed there was a man who would hang out near our team’s dugout and would occasionally yell over to my dad and call him “preacher.” The man was scruffy, looked unclean, and smelled (I later figured out he had been drinking). I never had seen this man at church and wondered who he was and why he knew my father.

When the softball game was over, I noticed my father talking to the scruffy man. After the next game I attended the man was there again and the same thing happened. This time my father invited the man (whose name was Robert) to ride with us to the Waffle House. Robert sat with us and my father bought his meal. My father and Robert talked about various things, including God. I never saw Robert come to our church. Robert ended up going to the Waffle House with us that summer about three times. Each time my father would buy his meal.

A few months later I decided to ask my father about Robert. I asked him why he bought Robert's meals and why he did not come to our church. My father explained that Robert was an alcoholic and was not able to keep a

job. My father explained to me that as a Christian he was to do good for others, and Robert especially needed help. He told me he had invited Robert to church but he did not feel comfortable attending a formal church service.

My father was a man of great faith in God. He also did many things for many people. What we will look at today is the relationship between faith and works. Our Epistle text today is James 2:14-18, which contains the well-known verse, “So faith, if it has no works, is dead” The book of James has created debate over the years because of a later statement in verse 24 of that passage, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” In the Protestant tradition the belief is that one is justified before God by faith alone, and one of the

main ideas in the Protestant tradition is that one is not saved by works. Today we will examine James 2:14-18 and will also look at how good works are treated in the Methodist tradition.

In his sermon “Salvation by Faith,” John Wesley clearly takes the position that one is only saved by faith. He writes, “For by grace you are saved by faith: and that not of yourselves (Eph.2:4-5, 7-8). Of yourselves, cometh neither your faith nor your salvation.”¹ In the same sermon, though, it is important to note that Wesley also addressed good works. He wrote that he spoke of a faith

¹ Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley Sermons, An Anthology*. (Nashville, Abingdon Press. 1999), 45.

which was not against good works but was “necessarily productive of all good works and all holiness.”²

We must also consider that the Articles of Religion of the United Methodist church address good works. Article 10 reads: “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 judgments; yet they are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ and spring out of a true and lively faith insomuch that by them a lively faith can be as evidently known as a tree is discerned by its fruit.”³

² Ibid., 44.

³ Ted. A. Campbell. *Methodist Doctrines. The Essentials*. (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2011), 117.

In Chapter 2 of the book of James the author is concerned about how Christians are treating other Christians. They are paying more attention to the person who comes into the church with fine clothes than the poor person with dirty clothes. James emphasizes in James 2:8 that one will do well to follow the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

James insists that faith alone is not adequate without the deeds of the faith. Faith and deeds must go together for the faith to be valid. For faith to be professed it must be manifested in deeds (works).

One of the major problems in the church to which James is writing is that the poor are being mistreated. He brings up the example of the brother and sister who are

naked and lack daily food. If the Christian just tells them to go in peace, keep warm, and eat their fill, but does not supply their bodily needs, what good is the presence of the Christian? The Christian has done nothing to help these people and as a result the Christian's faith is dead, because it is not accompanied by works (James 2:17).

James is rather sarcastic when he addresses those who say that belief in God is enough. He points out that even the demons, who oppose God, believe in Him.

James references Genesis 22:1-18, which is the story of Abraham's call to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham had prepared the altar and had the knife ready to sacrifice Isaac. He was prepared to do what God had ordered him

to do. God stopped him and provided him with a ram for the sacrifice. It was the ultimate test of one's faith.

James writes that Abraham's obedience was an act of faith. His faith was brought to perfection by the deed. We learn from James that deeds do not replace faith; they complete it. Abraham's faith is shown in action.

Abraham's acts bear out his righteousness. When one fails to act, faith without deeds is dead.⁴

When James writes, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone," he is not writing that works alone justify someone in the eyes of God. He emphasizes that faith and works go together in

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson. "James." *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XII.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 196-199.

the faithful Christian. This is consistent with the Methodist statement in the Articles of Religion which states that good works spring out of a true and lively faith.

John Wesley developed general rules for the Methodist societies which called for action on behalf of its members. He called on the members to do good, as far as possible to everyone, to the best of their ability, to give food to the hungry, cloth the naked, visit those who are sick, and visit those who are in prison.⁵ Wesley's admonition reminds one of Matthew 25:31-46, our lectionary reading for this week, in which Christ says that when one feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, takes care

⁵ Campbell, 127.

of the sick, or visits one in prison, it is like doing such things for Him. In this passage in which Christ determines who will inherit the kingdom of God, it is quite apparent that taking action as a Christian is very important.

The scene described in Matthew 25 is really the only imagery in the New Testament of the final judgment.

What is telling is that the standard Christ uses to determine who will spend eternity with him. The standard is not the confession of faith in Christ. Nothing is said of grace, justification or the forgiveness of sins. What counts is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people. Such deeds are not a matter of “extra credit” but constitute the decisive criteria of judgment.

Jesus taught that self-giving care for others is the heart of the revealed word of God in the Torah. These deeds continue in his kingdom. Jesus' kingdom consists of service to others. The fundamental thrust of the scene in Matthew 25 is that when people respond to human needs, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding or failing to respond to Christ.

What is interesting is that in Matthew 25 both the sheep and the goats are clueless in every way. It surprised them to learn that whenever they encountered the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, and imprisoned, they had, in the flesh, encountered Jesus, the Son of man. What this image further tells us is that our acts of compassion should flow naturally from our faith. They should not be

acts trying to center the attention on ourselves, by saying to God and others. See me doing good? Seem me doing the right thing? See me making it all about me?

So, what does this mean today for you in the church?

James writes that we pay attention to the ragged homeless person who wanders into our assembly, and not just give attention to those with money. Like my father, do you take action to feed and minister to anyone in the community?

Although justification is by faith, both scripture and the Methodist tradition show that action needs to accompany that faith to show that it is real. Like John Wesley exhorts us, are we feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and those in prison?

On a trip to Ireland and Scotland in 2016, I saw flocks of sheep grazing in the fields. Interestingly, each flock seemed to number about 100 as mentioned in the scripture in Luke. I also noticed one time that a sheep had crossed a fence and had become entangled. I knew that the owner eventually found that sheep and returned it to the flock because it had value.

In the same way, as Christians we should always take steps to return the lost sheep to the flock. In the scriptures lost sheep serve as a metaphor for those people who are lost in their faith and need direction. Besides telling them the Gospel story and our story of faith, we are often able to lead them back to the flock by providing for their physical needs. We should always remember that our faith

should be accompanied by some good deed, and this deed should help someone, no matter the background of that person. We can all then celebrate that the lost sheep has been found.