

The Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 50:5-9a
<i>Response</i>	I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalms 116:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 2:14-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 8:27-35

The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time brings us to what is perhaps the most famous passage in the Letter of James, and that is his statement about the relationship between faith and works, and his declaration that faith without works is dead. So let's look at what James has to say about these things, and also, as we're reading it, ask ourselves, how do we reconcile this with St. Paul's teaching in Romans 3 and Galatians 2 on justification by faith apart from works of the law? And so we'll try to see how those go together here. James 2:14-18 is a short passage, but here's what it says:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But some one will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Although the lectionary doesn't give it, I'm just going to keep going down. If you keep reading, there are two more verses that are important. Verse 19, where James says:

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.

And then also he goes on to give some examples of faith and works together from figures like Abraham. And then he says this important word in chapter 2, verse 24:

You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

This is kind of the climax of his teaching. So let's just go through this and just a minute...take a few minutes. The first thing we need to realize is in order to understand the passage, we want to define our terms. So when James is talking about faith, what does he mean? The Greek word here, faith, *pistis*, has a number of different connotations, multiple meanings. It can mean to believe in something. It can also mean to trust someone. It has both of those dimensions of meaning. In this context, James seems to be using *pistes*, faith, primarily with regard to the intellectual assent or belief in something as true. You can see that in the verse that the lectionary left out, but which I read. “You believe [*pisteuō*] that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.”

In other words, for James, the kind of faith he's talking about here is the faith that the demons have. They believe that God is one. They know that's true. They intellectually assent to it, but they still shudder at the prospect of judgment that God will enact upon them for their wicked actions. So the belief that he's talking about with the demons is not trust. The demons might believe in God, but they don't trust God and then follow commandments of God, obviously. So it is a little more focused on intellectual assent to something as true. That is what he means by faith. Works, in this context, clearly have to do with works of charity, or good deeds toward one's neighbor. You can see this by verse 15. After James says:

[I]f a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?

And the obvious implied answer to that question is “No. No it can’t.” The example he gives is:

If a brother or sister...

That means a fellow Christian.

...is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body...

You have not performed a work, a good work. So he is saying here that the faith, the belief in Christ, the belief in God, has to be accompanied by good works like giving clothing to a brother or sister that need clothing, or giving food and drink to a brother or sister who is thirsty or hungry. So you can already, just from that basic definition, begin to see the difference between James’ statement on faith and works and St. Paul’s statement on faith and works. So when James will talk about “a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” The works that James is referring to, in context, have nothing to do with circumcision. Whereas, if you look at St. Paul’s teaching in Galatians 2, he is clearly talking about being justified apart from works of the law. Meaning being made righteous, being declared righteous, being justified without engaging in the work of circumcision and everything that comes with that. So, similar phraseology, but the context is different, and the context determines the meaning here in ways that are important to keep in mind. There's a distinction there.

Paul and James are addressing two distinct situations. Paul is writing to people who think that the work of circumcision is necessary for justification or for salvation, and Paul saying no, faith is all you need. Faith apart from works of the law is sufficient for justification. Whereas James is talking about people who think that believing in Christ is enough, and they don't have to do anything. They don't have to be a doer of the word, they can just hear it and believe it, and that that's sufficient for salvation. It doesn't matter how they treat their neighbor or someone who's poor or hungry. And James says no, belief alone, faith alone, is not enough to save. A person is justified by works and not by faith alone. So it's not enough for

you to say I believe in Jesus, but to treat the poor, especially the poor who are members of the Church, poorly and not to care for their needs. In other words, to refuse to engage in acts of charity. So the context here, then, to sum it up, is that James is saying:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But some one will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

“what does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith”, that is belief, but he doesn't have works, that is works of charity, “can his faith save him?” No. And the reason why is because James 2:24, “ a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” So, you don't have to take my word for this interpretation, though. We can actually look at the living tradition of the Church to back it up. It's very important here that the question of the relationship between faith and works isn't just a modern question. It's not even just a question going back to the Protestant Reformation in 16th century. It's a question that goes back to the early Church Fathers, because people recognized, “hey, Paul and James seem to be saying something, at least at first glance, that appears to be maybe contradictory, at least in tension with one another. How do we understand it?” And so great figures, like St. Augustine of Hippo, wrote writings on this topic. And Augustine's classic treatise is called *On Faith and Works*. I'd like to read to you a passage from it, as well as from St. Bede the Venerable, on this particular text of James and let you hear how the Church Fathers interpret the relationship between faith and works. This is what Saint Augustine said.

Oh, and before I mentioned this, let me just make this preliminary point. If you've heard the expression faith alone, you've probably heard it on the lips of someone who's inheriting a traditional way of understanding it from Martin Luther, right, who had the motto of justification *sola fide*, justification through faith alone. He

even added that word to Romans 3 when Paul talks about justification. I deal with that in one of my other videos. And so in the tradition flowing from Luther, many people, when they talk about justification by *sola fide*, justification by faith alone, what they mean is all that matters, or all that's necessary for salvation, is faith, and it doesn't matter what you do. Your works can never cause you to lose your salvation. They're not determinative for salvation. Faith alone is all that's necessary. And of course this is clearly at odds with what James says in James 2 that we just read, which is one of the reasons why James was famously described by Luther as an epistle of straw right that was worthy of the fire of the furnace, being thrown into the oven. Because in Luther's theology, James' emphasis on works as necessary, and faith alone as being insufficient, would not jive with Luther's own theology of salvation, right? So he actually denigrated James to kind of deuterocanonical status, a secondary status, as one of the books of the Bible that he did not think of as equally authoritative and equally inspired with, say, the writings of St. Paul, for example.

All right, so with that, Lutheran, or Martin Luther's understanding of *sola fide*, a very widely Protestant understanding of *sola fide* in mind, look at what Augustine says, because Augustine was a crucial figure for Martin Luther. Luther was an Augustinian monk, and yet on this point he did not follow Augustine in Augustine's interpretation on James. This is what Augustine says:

In the first place, we feel that we should advise the faithful that they would endanger the salvation of their souls if they acted on the false assurance that faith alone is sufficient for salvation or that they need not perform good works in order to be saved.²

Pause there. It sounds almost like Augustine is summarizing Luther's position, you know, 1000 years before Luther himself, right? So people were already making that mistake. They were already interpreting Paul in an incorrect way as saying, "all that matters is faith. It doesn't matter what I do. Once I've come to faith in Christ, that's sufficient. My works don't count." Augustine calls that a false assurance. He continues:

² Augustine, *On Faith and Works* 21; trans. Gregory J. Lombardo.

This, in fact, is what some had thought even in the time of the apostles. For at that time there were some who did not understand certain rather obscure passages of St. Paul... When St. Paul says, therefore, that man is justified by faith and not by the observance of the law [Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16], he does not mean that good works are not necessary or that it is enough to receive and profess the faith and no more. What he means rather and what he wants us to understand is that man can be justified by faith, even though he has not previously performed any works of the law. For the works of the law are meritorious not before but after justification... As we said above, this opinion originated at the time of the apostles, and that is why we find some of them, *for example, Peter, John, James, and Jude writing against it in their epistles and asserting very strongly that faith is no good without works*. And as regards Paul himself, he does not say that any faith in God is good, but he says clearly that faith is good and in conformity with the teaching of the gospel which results in works of love: "*and faith,*" he says, "*that works by charity*" [Gal 5:6].

Okay, so pause. Let me unpack what Augustine just did there. This is fascinating. What Augustine says is the error, the erroneous idea of a false assurance from a belief in justification by faith alone, actually goes back to the time of the Apostles. In other words, people were already misinterpreting Paul as meaning all you have to do is believe, and it doesn't matter what you do. And that James, the Letter of James, as well as some of the other Catholic epistles, were written to correct that false assurance already in the Apostolic age. So Augustine would read James not as a correction or contradiction of Paul, but he would read James as a correction of people who are misinterpreting Paul, misinterpreting what Paul meant by justification by faith apart from works of the law. So it's a fascinating reading where Augustine is basically saying the Catholic Epistles are a corrective to misinterpretation of Paul's earlier writings, and the misinterpretation that Augustine attributes to these early Apostolic figures, or figures living in the Apostolic period, is basically the same position that Martin Luther will later take up as an erroneous interpretation of Paul based on Galatians 2 and Romans 3, the same passages that Augustine singles out as being misinterpreted in the Apostolic period.

So a really fascinating text, and it's not just St. Augustine. A similar view is taken by Bede the Venerable in the 8th century in his commentary on the Catholic Epistles where he writes this about James 2:

Since the apostle Paul, preaching that “man is made righteous by faith without works” (Roma 3:28), was not well understood by those who took this saying to mean that when they had once believed in Christ, even though they might commit evils and live wickedly and basely, they could be saved by faith, *[James] explains how the passage of the apostle Paul ought to be understood to have the same meaning as this letter.*³

So notice Bede adds a little dimension to it. He points out that some people will say, on the basis of Paul's letters, not only am I saved by faith alone, but it doesn't matter what I do after I've come to faith. I can do wicked acts, I can perform acts of sin, I can perform what we would call mortal sins, and there's no way for me to lose my salvation. And sadly, there are Christians to this day who actually hold that view. Sometimes you'll hear it described as the doctrine of the absolute assurance of salvation, that once a person believes in Jesus, it doesn't matter what they do after faith and baptism. They can never lose the salvation that was won through faith alone. That's a dangerous, dangerous and pernicious false doctrine, according to St. Bede. And so again, he argues that James himself wrote against that erroneous idea and that erroneous interpretation of Paul, when he uttered the famous lines, “faith without works is dead”, and perhaps even more striking, “that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

It is impossible, though we perform ten thousand other good deeds, to enter the portals of the kingdom without almsgiving.⁴

³ Bede, *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*, on James 2:20-21; trans. D. Hurst

⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John 23*; trans. Gary Anderson

