

## 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>	Psalm 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

Hey Everybody, welcome back to what should be our final quarantined addition of the Mass Readings Explained. Today we are looking at the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, the second reading for this day. We are going to be continuing to journey through the letter of James. In this case, the lectionary gives us what is easily the most famous passage in the letter of St. James, and that is the passage on faith without works being dead. So without any further adieu, we are going to dive in here to James 2:14-18; that's the second reading for today and this is 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Alright, so a very famous passage, very powerful passage. One that is very commonly used, at least in the last five centuries, as a point of apologetics or a response to the Protestant Reformation's slogan (going back to Martin Luther) of justification by faith alone (in Latin, *Sola Fide*); the idea that in order to be justified or to be declared righteous, to be saved, all one has to do is have faith. *Sola Fide*, faith alone. This text—you have probably already heard this so I won't go in to many details about it—famously Martin Luther, who was originally an Augustinian monk and then became one of the leading Protestant reformers, had a very difficult relationship with the letter of James precisely because he was promulgating the slogan of justification by faith alone. That slogan of faith alone, that expression faith alone in Scripture only occurs in the letter of James 2, where in James 2:24 it actually says:

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

So the only time faith alone occurs is when the letter of James rejects that as a way of summarizing the teaching of the apostles on justification. That is a long and complex debate that we don't have time to get into right now, but for now the main point I want to highlight is what does James mean? What is the meaning of James' words about faith and works in context? In their original context what is James trying to say and how has it been interpreted in the tradition of the Catholic Church?

So I just want to say a few words about this. The first thing we want to ask is if we are trying to see what James means in its original context, we want to look at how he's using these two words: faith and works. So in context here, James is using the word faith or belief (Greek *pistis*), you can translate it either way, to talk about what we would regard as maybe the intellectual assent to some supernatural truth of faith. You can see that is how he's using the word if you look at the next couple of verses that the lectionary didn't give us, but which are really important to understanding it in context. So because the word faith, *pistis* in Greek, is somewhat ambiguous, it can mean trust or fidelity or belief — it can have all those different connotations. The fact that James here is using it primarily in the connotation of what we would call belief, is really clear in the next verse. So in verse 18 when James says:

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 (*pistis*).

The next verse says:

You believe...

Pisteuō - verbal form of the same noun.

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

That verse is really crucial. So in context, when James talks about *pistis* (faith), you have to look at the way he uses the verb *pisteuō* to know what he means, what is the connotation that he is using. And in context here, he is saying even demons have the kind of faith (*pistis*) that I'm talking about. Namely, an intellectual assent to some truth about God. In this case James is saying look, you might believe that God is one. Here he's alluding to the standard Jewish belief, later described as monotheism, that although there are many angels and archangels and good angels and bad angels, and although all the pagans have these various gods and goddesses that they worship, the only true God is the one God of Israel. Basically, James is alluding here to what we might call the Jewish creed or the Shema, that passage from Deuteronomy 6:4 -6

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord...

So when James says you believe that the Lord is one, remember he's taking to Jewish Christians who would have assented to the Shema, they would've in fact prayed it multiple times a day. Already in the first century that was customary to pray the Schema multiple times a day. So the affirmation of God's oneness is a basic article of faith in first century Judaism. So what James is saying to his audiences is “look, you have faith. You believe (*pisteuō*) that God is one, but you share that faith with demons.” Even the demons assent to the fact that God is one. They believe that he's one, because they understand and they know the truth of

monotheism. But the demons believe and shudder, because although their intellect is conformed to and recognizes the truth that God is one, their wills are not conformed to obedience to that God. In other words, they might assent to the intellectual truth, but they don't have any charity residing in the soul. And for that reason they are damned.

This is really important. I have stressed this with my students over the years. Orthodoxy (right belief) is not enough to save you. You also have to have a rightly ordered will. Satan, for example, according to James, you can infer Satan and the evil angels know all the truths of the faith. They believe them because they assent to them and they recognize them, but they're still damned because their wills are not conformed to the will of God. This is what James is getting at here when he's talking about faith — that would be the conformity of the intellect to truth — being without works — that would be the conformity of the will to the good, to doing good — faith without works is dead. It is not enough to save you. So it's very important here to recognize what kind of faith James is talking about. Intellectual assent is not enough.

In addition to that you need to have works. The Greek word here is *erga*. You can translate that as deeds as well, actions. So if you go back to verse 14, once you know what James means when he refers to faith, then when he refers to works it's very clear what the context is. He says:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?

And the implied answer to that question is no. Well how is that possible? Well here he explains:

If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food...

So if they are either naked or hungry

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.

Alright, so this is very, very important. In context, what kind of works does James say faith without having works is dead? It is works of charity, works of charity. In other words, you could summarize James's teaching here as faith without works of charity is dead. That's how he can go on to say:

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

So it is not just any kind of works that he is talking about here. He is talking about particular acts of charity toward the poor, who don't have any kind of clothing to cover themselves, and the hungry, those who are in need of food. If you think you are a Christian simply because you are orthodox and you believe the truth, and you do not practice acts of charity, guess what? Your salvation is in jeopardy according to James 2:14-18, which is in the lectionary for this week.

Now you might think, Dr. Pitre, that's a little dramatic, aren't you kind of over interpreting that. No, where is James getting this idea from, that acts of charity are necessary for salvation. Well you just have to go back to the Gospels. In Matthew 25 you have the famous parable of the sheep and the goats, where Jesus makes very clear that ministry to the poor...

for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.  
(Matt 25: 35-36)

Any type of acts of charity toward those groups are actually acts of charity done toward him, and apart from such acts of charity you will end up in the goat line at the final judgment. There are these two lines, sheep and the goats. I always tell my students, if you show up to the final judgment and there is the sheep line and the goat line, get in the sheep line, because the goat line leads to everlasting separation from God. As Jesus says:

Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt 25:41)

That is exactly what James is alluding to here, to the recognition of the damnation of the unholy Angels and that that's prepared for them because they lack charity. So if you think I'm over-interpreting, go back to the words of Jesus because he makes very clear that acts of charity are necessary for salvation in the parable of the sheep and the goats. And then it's not just me, you can look listen to two great saints. I'll give you two saints, actually three, in closing from the sacred tradition, the living tradition. St. Augustine, one of the greatest doctors of the church, in his very important book *On Faith and Works*, which is short but I cannot recommend it highly enough. If you are interested in the question of the relationship between faith and works, check out Augustine's treatise *On Faith and Works*. You will see some very surprising things in here if you have never read it before. In this treatise he actually deals with this chapter and this is what he says, because Augustine is responding to the apparent contradiction between Paul's teaching on justification by faith apart from works of the law in Galatians 2 or Romans 3 and James' teaching on justification by works and not by faith alone in chapter 2. So here is what he says, listen to this:

*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.<sup>2</sup>*

Alright, pause there. There are lots of Christians, I mean millions of Christians outside of the Catholic church to this day that believe exactly what Augustine just said. They have a false assurance that faith alone is sufficient for salvation and they need not perform good works in order to be saved. Now it's not all Protestants, don't get me wrong. There are nuances and differences of position, but there are lots of non-Catholic Christians who believe exactly this teaching Augustine just laid out on the basis of a misinterpretation of Paul's letters, which we have dealt with elsewhere. But listen to what Augustine says:

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<sup>2</sup> 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...

This is really important. So what Augustine is saying is, when Paul says we are justified by faith and not works of the law, he's referring to what we would call initial justification. In other words, the grace of justification at the beginning of salvation. Nothing you do before the initial grace of baptism earns salvation, no work that you perform. We as Catholics teach that, the Council of Trent taught it definitively. They are really following Augustine here. So it's not what you've done before your baptism. So works do not justify before baptism, but after the grace of baptism, after the grace of justification, works play an essential role in justification and in subsequent sanctification and ultimate salvation. So that's me, but now Augustine continues. Listen to what he says:

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].

This is a really crucial passage, because what it shows is that Augustine thinks that the error of justification *sola fide* (faith alone), is something that actually goes back to the time of the apostles, and that what James and some of the other Catholic epistles are doing is writing a corrective to a misinterpretation of some of the teachings of St. Paul. This is fascinating. So what he is showing here is that faith is no good unless it's followed up by works. So after a person has come to believe in Jesus and been baptized, they have to live a life of good works. Otherwise they can lose the grace of justification. And it is not just Augustine who said this. Another favorite father of mine, Bede the Venerable, writing in the early eighth

century in England, a Doctor of the Church. In his commentary on the Catholic epistles says, and I'm quoting again:

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.*<sup>3</sup>

So notice, what Bede is saying here is that James is not contradicting Paul, he's contradicting a misinterpretation of Paul being made by some Christians in the early church. This is a really, really fascinating point. Now if you want more on this I actually wrote an essay for a volume called *Perspectives on Paul*. It's a collection of essays by four Protestant scholars and me. It is kind of a collection of a lot of different views on justification in Paul, and I have an initial essay, a long essay at the beginning called the Roman Catholic perspective on Paul. I also respond to the other scholars in the book and we have a dialogue back and forth. So this book, *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views*, will give you my overview of the Catholic perspective on justification in St. Paul and the whole question of justification *sola fide* (by faith alone) and the role of works. So you can check that out.

In closing, I just want to emphasize this. On the one hand, James 2 makes very clear, and a lot of Catholics understandably take encouragement from the fact that this passage shows quite clearly that justification by faith without works is not a teaching of Scripture, but that James is making sure we understand that justification is by faith — obviously it is by faith — but it also is by works, depending on whether you are talking about initial justification or final justification. In other words, faith and works go together. It is not enough to just believe in order to be saved. That faith has to manifest itself in works. That's very comforting for a Catholic to recognize that the church's teaching on this matter is rooted in Scripture.

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



At the same time it is a very challenging text, because what it's showing to us is that if you have faith but you don't have any works of charity, you're in danger. And I'll quote here — this is very important — John Chrysostom, last quote, he says this:

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

So he is talking about acts of charity, giving to the poor. So Chrysostom here is just one of many church fathers who reiterate this basic principle that James is teaching here. That if you have faith, if you have right doctrine, intellectual assent to truth, but you don't manifest it through acts of charity toward your neighbor, toward love of neighbor, that kind of faith cannot save. James says it:

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 you don't meet that need then faith by itself is dead. So let this text both be a consolation to us about the truth of the Church's teaching and a challenge to make our faith come alive in works of charity, because faith without works of charity is not a saving faith, it is a dead faith.

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<sup>4</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 23; trans. Gary Anderson