

By Good Works? How The Bible Works

Pentecost 21

A sermon on the Epistle of James

You likely have heard of the book, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown. In 2003 on the first day the book was released, it sold one million hard-cover copies, making it the fastest selling adult novel in history. A few years later Brown wrote a sequel, *The Lost Symbol*, that also broke sales records.

What is there about *The Da Vinci Code* that is so attractive? Do you think Dan Brown used a plot generator? Using a plot generator, one can plug in a certain city and a secret society, and then the plot generator will turn out a five-hundred-page novel. It all is done according to a formula. And it all revolves around sex and violence.

But that isn't enough to explain why these books are successful. Parts are totally or obviously wrong. *The Lost Symbol* has a long section in the middle that is said to be boring. What is there that sells them?

It's because the plot is about a plot. The claim is that "others" have kept you in the dark, but we are letting you in on the big secret. "They" are keeping it from you. We are revealing it to you. That's what sells.

Which brings us to the problem before us today. Luther, commenting on John 15 on the vine and branches, once wrote: "By doing good works you will prove that you have faith." He even uses the word "prove." By doing good works, you will prove that you are the branch and not cast off.

What's going on here? Have "they" – the Luther scholars or Lutheran pastors – been keeping those passages from us? In fact there are many statements like that in those more than one hundred large octavo volumes by Luther. You may say: Well, why then have you been telling us that salvation is by faith alone and not by works when there are these other passages?

Then one has to face the fact that over a long period of time and many occasions, Luther said many things. But if you pressed him, he would come back to what he wrote intentionally in the Small Catechism in the Third Article: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding believe...." And the Holy Spirit is the one who sanctifies.

All of that is to lead to the fact that in the New Testament we have all kinds of different things. Just the other day someone wrote that the charter of Christianity is Galatians 3:28:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free." This is the charter of tolerance of welcome, and this is the key to the whole Bible!!

Someone else, this person from one wing of the Baptist church, said that everything depends on what you say about Revelation 20:2-3 where it talks about the Millennium, and does that come before the Tribulation and before Christ comes? Or does it come afterward? And that's the key to all of Scripture!!

Or if you talk to a Roman Catholic long enough, what you come to finally is: Don't forget the key to Scripture is Matthew 16:18: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church."

Or if you talk to somebody from the Eastern Orthodox, they will say: "Remember 2 Peter 1:4: "We will become partakers of the divine nature." We become God. That's the key to the Bible from their point of view.

Many years ago in the national dialogue between Lutherans and the Eastern Orthodox, a Greek Orthodox professor of the New Testament turned to the Lutherans and said: "What's the matter with you people? Can't you read Greek? It says in James 2:6: 'Faith without works is dead.'"

Of course we will never know Greek as well as the Greeks, but we do know about that passage. If you take a survey among people, one of the top ten passages people know is: "Faith without works is dead." Or "By their fruits you shall know them." They may not know where it comes from, but they know it.

You may think: What are you preachers keeping from us? You have said "faith alone," but you aren't you keeping James 2:6 from us? You tell us that salvation is not by works, and what do we do now?

We have the Epistle of James in the New Testament. Luther is famous for having written: "It is an Epistle of straw." Not only once, but also late in his life. When he published the New Testament in German in 1522, he put four books at the end: Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, without page numbers and not included in the index and separated by some space from the rest of the New Testament, exactly the way he dealt with the Apocrypha in the Old Testament. He separated out those books because, as he said: You don't find Christ in them.

It's true in James 1:1 and 2:1 the name Christ is used, but basically where is Christ alone by faith alone in these books? Luther was not alone. People think that he was eccentric, a wild man. Actually, Erasmus, the greatest classical scholar of the time, held the same thing about James, and so did Cardinal Cajetan, who was the major theologian of the Roman Catholic Church at that time. This view of James was common.

What do we do about James? Some Lutherans today say that Luther did say this but, you know, it is significantly there in the Bible. It tells us how to live.

What is the problem? The problem is the Epistle of James and using the Bible. The problem in James is not about faith and works; it is about: Can we keep the law? James says we can:

1:22: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only. . . ."

1:25: "But a doer who acts, he shall be blessed. . . ."

2:8: "If you really fulfill the royal law. . . ."

2:12: "So speak and so act as those who are judged under the law of liberty."

2:18: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."

2:21, 24: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see . . . faith was completed by works. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone."

Here is Abraham, friend of God, and this text from the covenant with Abraham; he is saved by works and not faith alone, and faith without works is dead. That is about as clear and as plain as you would wish.

What does Paul do in the fourth chapter of Romans? He talks about Abraham. There in vs 3 he quotes the same place from Genesis 15:6:

"'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as he due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies he ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."

Here Abraham is just the opposite. Abraham is not the friend of God but ungodly. And it's not by works but by faith and only by faith. Works don't count. And this spelled out in the same chapter of Romans, 4:13-14:

"The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void."

One can't get around what Paul does in Romans 7:1-6. Here he talks about the law, using the analogy of what happens when one partner in the marriage dies. When one of them, the husband or wife, dies, they are no longer married. So, too, with the law. The law was there until Christ came. But when Christ came, the law doesn't count anymore. The same thing is in Galatians 3:1-29.

Yet there are places in Paul, such as Romans 1:5 where the text is about the obedience of faith and Galatians 5:6 about faith active in love.

What is the total Paul? What is the total New Testament? This is not apples and oranges. There are **real** differences. This is not comparable to how some say tomāto, and some say tomāto. No, this is exclusionary. This is a contradiction. Either the law can be kept, or it can't be kept. James and Paul are in full contradiction. Has there been a deep plot by Luther and Lutherans to keep us from giving James his due? Should one study James to see how "they" have been keeping it in hiding? Not at all!

How do we use the Bible? We could point out all kinds of problems, problems you don't need to know about. And we don't go around counting texts. We ask ourselves to weigh them. How do we sort it out?

The key to scripture is the cross. You may recall that Paul, when he's dealing critically in 1 Corinthians 2:2, writes: "I resolve to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified" – that's the key. That's the test. And everything else is to be seen in relation to that. Otherwise we get caught in all these problems that produce all these divisions and all these fights. It's not an intellectual game. And it's not something where you can say: Well, those are "the scholars," but we can just take it as it is.

Salvation is at stake. That's what it's about. And salvation, the Gospel, is that Jesus Christ died and rose for you and me. That's the test of everything. Amen