

Christ is the Answer. What is the Problem?

Romans 4:13-25

A sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

In this season of Pentecost we ask: What is the problem? The problem is that we are worse off than we think. There is nothing in us, in ourselves, that can save us. We are caught in sin and death and even though we can't quite take it that there's nothing in us, there isn't.

Two huge objections come up: Today we'll deal with the first one and that is, of course: Good works. After all, good works are good. That's common sense. What do we mean by "good works?"

There is endless nonsense about the Pearly Gates: Your works are weighed when you arrive, or there is some trick question, or something you can or should say, like: "I once gave someone a dollar." And the answer: "Oh well, fine, come right in," as if salvation has to do with "good works."

After all, common sense says good works can't do any harm; they ought to do some good. What's wrong with that?

That's not to say that we're perfect. We're only human, of course. But the thing is: We should do what we can, given the way we are made.

Shortly before the Reformation there was a famous phrase everyone knew that said: "Just do whatever is in you." That is all that is needed. You can do that and that's what it's really about. After all, you could be worse. You're not as bad you as could be. There are always worse things you could be and do.

Good works: That's what it's really about. As we look around at other religions, they say that, too. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and the like are based on saying: "If your religion doesn't show some good works, then what is it?" We can see that in the rebirth of karma in Hinduism, rewards in Islam, and the like. It's not about talking the talk, but walking the walk.

In the text from Hosea 5:15-6:6, the Gospel text (Matt 9:9-13, 18-26), and in Psalm 50:7-15, the message is: It is not about externals. The Lord says: I do not want external practices. I know you can do sacrifices that are external, but what about the heart? What about what is in you really?

Finally, we have to keep up with the Joneses, and “the Joneses” means our understanding of what’s O.K. We are good enough and we are not as bad as the worst in what we do.

Our hypocrisy is known by the world as is shown in a famous poem by the Scottish poet Robert Burns. He talks about being in church one Sunday. He obviously was not paying attention because in front of him was a beautiful young woman, named Jenny, all decked out in a lovely coat, hat, and cascading hair. All at once a louse crawled up her hair. He watched it as it disappeared into her hair, then it came out and went up on her hat. This is a long poem in old Scottish so it is hard to give the lines exactly, but near the end he says to her, not directly, but in his mind: “Jenny, you think you are decked out, you’ve got it made, you’re really fine, but then comes the famous line: “O would that we had the gift to see ourselves as others see us.”

In 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 Paul makes a deeper point about our inability to judge ourselves:

“It is a small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.”

The fall into sin as it is described in Genesis 3 is that we think we know the difference between good and evil. We think: “I know what sin is. I can depend on myself. This is good and that is evil.” Paul writes here: “I do not know of anything against myself. I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges.”

There is nothing in ourselves that we can point to. Of course we can deceive ourselves.

In our confessional service we talk about sins of omission. We are concerned not only with sins of commission, but what about those things we don’t do. We tend to forgive ourselves for those things: “I didn’t know.”

Did we do that sincerely? In Luke 17:10 there is that end of the parable which says: “When you have done all that is commanded you, say: ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what is our duty.’”

What about being perfect? 1 Peter 1:16 is clear: “Be ye holy as I am holy,” quoting Leviticus 11:44-45. This is paraphrased in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew

5:48: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." We are not cut any slack. In Romans 3:8 and 6:1 and 15, Paul says sarcastically: "Let us sin that grace may abound." After all, no matter what we do, grace abounds. Paul does not mean that, of course.

This leads to chapter four in Romans about Abraham. Abraham was 100 and his wife Sarah was about 90 and there was this promise that they would have an heir, a son. It did not happen. They hoped against hope. And then they had Isaac. The One who can bring a son to parents that old is the One who creates out of nothing ("calls into existence the things that do not exist" Romans 4:17). That One also "gives life to the dead." But the greatest thing of all is what is stated in Romans 4:5: That same One "justifies the ungodly." That is the biggest thing. That is who we are, and that is who Abraham was, the ungodly. And all this business about good works is false religion. Good works, whatever they are, have their place, but they have nothing to do with salvation.

You may say: "What about Bible verses that are difficult or confusing?" Consider for example one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament: Colossians 1:24. Here Paul writes: "I fill up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings." Yes, it is an accurate translation: "I fill up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings." Anyone who says: "I just take the simple, clear meaning of the Bible," has to ask: "What do I do here? How can Paul write such a thing? What is the key to it all?" The key to that verse as well as all other verses in the Bible is in the cross. That is the question: Does the cross have to be added to or supplemented by good works? Or a certain priesthood, a certain feeling or experience? No.

Thank God he has saved us. It is finished and that was done on the cross. We are made his own in Baptism. It is not dependent on us. As Luther writes, our salvation does "not depend on anything we are, think, say, or do" (Smalcald III/3/36, Tappert 309, Kolb/Wengert 318).

Our salvation is certain in him. Therefore we have the freedom we have as children of God. Amen