

## **Paul and James are at irreconcilable odds**

A Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

James 1 and 2

A big event back in 2003 was the publication of the book, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown. 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 was *The Da Vinci Code* that is so popular? There are several reasons, chief among them being that the plot is about a conspiracy. Conspiracies are naturally popular because they claim 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. To begin with, if someone were to ask you what did Luther preach and teach, you might rightly say he said we are saved by faith alone, not works.

Yet, look at this. Here’s a quote by Luther promoting good works as proof of faith: 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 part of the branch and not cast off. There you have it; Luther saying good works prove faith. This is just the opposite of what you’ve been taught about him.

What’s going on? Is there a conspiracy here? Have “they” – Lutheran scholars and 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. There are all kinds of things. You may say: Well, why then, Pastor, have you been telling us that salvation is by faith alone and not by works when there are these other passages in Luther?

One has to face the fact that over a long period of time and many situations, Luther wrote and 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 in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him....” 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 that are said. Some Christians say that the key to Christianity is Galatians 3:28:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free." This is the main thing: Tolerance, being welcoming. 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 thousand years. 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." That means that we deified; we become God. From their point of view, that's the key to the Bible.

Many years ago, in the formal US dialogue between Lutherans and the Eastern Orthodox, a Greek Orthodox team member turned to the Lutherans and said: "What's the matter with you people?! Can't you read Greek?! Can't you read what the Bible plainly says!? It says: 'Faith without works is dead.'"

Of course, we Lutherans will never know Greek as well as the Greeks themselves, but we do know about that passage. If you take a survey among the general population, one of the top ten passages people know is: "Faith without works is dead." Another is: "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 preachers have said "faith alone," but you aren't you keeping James 2:26 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." He wrote that not only early, 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. He put them at the end without page numbers. He didn't include them in the index, and he put some space between the rest of the New Testament and those four books, exactly the way he dealt with the Apocrypha from the Old Testament. He separated out those books because, as he said: "You don't find Christ in them."

It's true that in James 1:1 and 2:1 the name "Christ" is used. So what's the problem? The problem is: Where is salvation by 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 as sub-Christian was common.

What do we do about James? Some Lutheran seminaries today tell their students that while Luther did say it is an epistle of straw, what James says is significantly there in the Bible. It tells us how to live so we should hold to the Book of James.

What is the problem? The problem is the Epistle of James and how we use 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 in his doing. . . ."

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.

2:26: "Faith apart from works is dead."

Here in James 1:18-26 is Abraham, friend of God, and he, Abraham, is said to have been saved by works and not faith alone, and James 2:26 concludes: "Faith without works is dead." That is about as clear and as plain as you could wish.

Contrast that with what does Paul say about Abraham in the fourth chapter of Romans. There in Romans 4:3 Paul quotes the same place from Genesis that James quotes. Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Paul then adds: "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 the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Romans 4:4).

Here in Paul Abraham is just the opposite of how he is in James. Abraham is not the friend of God, as in James, but ungodly. And salvation is not by works, but by faith and only by faith. Works don't count.

This is spelled out in 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 a husband or wife dies. When one of them, 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.

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

What do we say about this? We ask: What is the total Paul? What is the total New Testament? This is not a matter of apples and oranges. This is not comparable to how some say tomāto, and some say tomāto. There are **real** differences between Paul and James. The difference is exclusionary. There is a contradiction here. Either the law can be kept, or it can't be kept. Either/or. James and Paul are in full contradiction.

Has there been a conspiracy, 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!

The real question is: How do we use the Bible? We could point out all kinds of problems, problems you don't need to know about, but they are there. 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 focuses 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 the Bible as it is.

We don't say that because 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