

## **Christianity is different**

James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Remember the book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002)? It was a publishing success by any standard. Approximately fifty million copies (!) were sold. In this book Pastor Rick Warren gave a forty-day program of how to live the Christian life.

How do we live the Christian life? How do you make it happen so you walk the walk, and not just talk the talk?

The lectionary committee that sets the texts for every Sunday has an emphasis on discipleship and living the Christian life in this latter part of the season of Pentecost. In fact, for four Sundays the Epistle texts are from the Book of James. This is our second week in James, and once again the focus is on the Christian life and discipleship. As it says in James 2:14-17:

“What does it profit 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?”

This is like James 1:27: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

And then at the end of James 2, as we noted last week, it says that Abraham is the one who is the friend of God. His faith was completed by his works. Then 2:24, we are “justified by works and not by faith alone,” and then 3:13: “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”

It’s important to note that this is not only in the Book of James. In Matthew 12:33 it again says (paraphrase): “A tree is judged by the fruit it bears.”

And John 13:35 (paraphrase): “You will know they are Christians by their love.”

And lest you think this is only in certain places and Paul does something different, two of the famous places in Paul are first, Rom 2:6-8:

“For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.”

And second, 2 Cor 5:10: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body."

There you have it. It's a matter of doing works and doing good. You can see them and you can tell. Nor is this simply a matter of the New Testament. It's easy to show it in the Old Testament, too.

What we forget is other religions. Hinduism is very much that which says your works make a difference, and your works are that which lead you to salvation.

Other religions have saints, too. There is nothing unique here in Christianity about that sort of thing. It's common sense. If it doesn't produce differences, what good is it?

Someone has said that "moralistic therapeutic deism," is the common religion of our day. Of course it's important to do good. Everybody believes in God in his or her own way and that is all that's important. This is a common way of thinking today.

What do we say to this?

What do we say when that which happened in 1517, in the Reformation, broke the unity of the church. It broke down the cultural pattern that had been there for 1,000 years and destroyed all kinds of things. It led to wars and uncovered huge differences.

Look at what it says in the New Testament. How can there be such a thing that goes against the common sense of: It's gotta work. It's gotta show. It's gotta make a difference.

What was it that happened in the Reformation? As far as the Book of James is concerned, it's important to remember, as we noted last week, that Luther called it an epistle of straw. He said this not only once, and not only at one time in his career. He said this both early and late.

And when he produced his famous New Testament translation into German, remember that he put four books at the end – James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation – separating them by a space from the other books, because none of them have a clear statement of the Gospel.

What is at stake here? Luther was rediscovering what we find in the Apostle Paul. You remember that Luther became a monk because he wanted to be sure that he could find salvation. It was said that as a monk you were supposed to fast and discipline yourself. He excelled at being a monk. He fasted twice as much. He used fewer blankets at bed, all such things in order to discipline himself. He took all the worst jobs in the monastery on himself. He did everything that was required of him and more.

The most important thing about Luther was not his keen mind, but his honesty. He was brutally honest about himself. He said (paraphrase): "Whatever I did, I came to realize that I did it selfishly. I was going to make it work. I was going to secure my salvation."

But all he ended up with was spiritual pride, or as he said (paraphrase): "When I realized it was spiritual pride, then I ended up in spiritual despair."

He knew those places that speak to that pride, most famously in Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt. Who can understand it?"

And Psalm 19:12: "Who can discern his errors?" And Romans 3:12: "No one does good, not even one."

He struggled: "Where can I find salvation and be sure? Have I done enough? Have I done it right?" He then speaks about the tower experience.

He had a spiritual advisor who said: "I'm going to assign you the task of teaching the Bible." As Luther was working on the Book of Romans, he came to Romans 1:17 (paraphrase): "The justice God demands," or "The righteousness that God demands is not a demand that we produce this, but it is the righteousness that God gives."

When that exploded on him, it changed everything. It changed his whole way of seeing how the Bible works. God gives us his righteousness. As Romans 1:16 says: "This gospel is the power of God for salvation."

The heavens opened, Luther wrote, and everything changed, and that's how the Reformation exploded among us, because he said: "When it isn't something that depends on me, but it's through him, then I can be sure. I can be certain."

When in other places Luther writes: "The cross alone is our theology," he is saying in other words what he had rediscovered in Romans 1: It's because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Therefore, he writes in Smalcald 3/3/36: "One thing is sure: We cannot pin our hope on anything we are, think, say, or do." (The superior translation is in Tappert 309).

Or again speaking of Abraham in Romans 4:5, Luther writes: "Justification is of the ungodly, and it's because Abraham held to this that Abraham was saved, as the ungodly.' It's a whole different way, and it changes everything. It's not an invention of Luther. It's really Luther studying Paul, as we unpack and understand the total of what Luther is doing.

You know the old hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers." In the second verse it says: "Like a mighty army moves the church of God." But we know that's not the way it's happened. It's been chaos, disaster. The history of the church is not the history of great progress and applause.

In 1541, twenty years after the breaking open of the Reformation, Luther said to his wife, Katie: "It didn't work. Nothing has changed. People are acting in the ways they always do."

In the middle of the Nineteenth Century there was a Norwegian missionary named Schreuder, who was sent to Zululand in South Africa to spread the Gospel and build congregations.

He worked for eighteen years before one person was baptized. You can imagine his sponsoring committee back in Norway writing to him every year: "Tell us about the progress you have made. We want evidence of growth." Imagine eighteen years before there was one who was baptized as a Christian.

Or look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote a famous book in 1938 titled *The Cost of Discipleship*, which said in effect: Here's how to live the Christian life. You can do it. You can make it happen. You can make it show.

Five years later, after being arrested and thrown in prison, soon to be executed, he wrote a letter to his close friend and in it he said about his earlier ideas about discipleship (paraphrase): "I was wrong. We live unreservedly in the world in all its complexity and duplicity, and the Christian life not based on our seeing and our producing, but it's based on what he does."

A line from the hymn, "Stand up, stand up for Jesus" says it well. Verse three goes like this: "Stand up, stand up for Jesus, stand in his strength alone." Stand on the basis of the Gospel. That's what it's all about. Amen.