

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of Hosea [hoh-ZAY-uh].²

“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim [**BAY-uh-limb**], and burned incense to graven images. I taught Ephraim [**EE-frih-eem**] also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them.

“He shall not return into the land of Egypt, and the Assyrian shall be his king, because they refused to return. And the sword shall abide on his cities, and shall consume his branches, and devour them, because of their own counsels. And my people are bent to backsliding from me: though they called them to the most High, none at all would exalt him. How shall I give thee up, Ephraim [**EE-frih-eem**]? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah [**ODD-mah**]? how shall I set thee as Zeboim [**zih-BOH-ihm**]? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim [**EE-frih-eem**]: for I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city. They shall walk after the LORD: he shall roar like a lion: when he shall roar, then the children shall tremble from the west. They shall tremble as a bird out of Egypt, and as a dove out of the land of Assyria: and I will place them in their houses, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. Ephraim [**EE-frih-eem**] compasseth me about with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit: but Judah yet ruleth with God, and is faithful with the saints.

“Ephraim [**EE-frih-eem**] feedeth on wind, and followeth after the east wind: he daily increaseth lies and desolation; and they do make a covenant with the Assyrians, and oil is carried into Egypt. The LORD hath also a controversy with Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; according to his doings will he recompense him.

“He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and by his strength he had power with God: Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him in Bethel [**BETH-ell**], and there he spake with us; Even the LORD God of hosts; the LORD is his memorial. Therefore turn thou to thy God: keep mercy and judgment and wait on thy God continually.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the General Epistle of James.³

“My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called? If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

“But some 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.... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.”⁸

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¹ An Alternative Table of Lessons (*The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928*), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 33 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (CIPBC 1963).

² Hosea 11:1-12:6 (KJV).

³ James 2:1-26 (KJV).

⁴ James 2:14-17 (RSV).

⁵ Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 607 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁶ *Ibid.* 606.

⁷ *Ibid.* 605.

⁸ James 2:18, 26 (RSV).

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For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law. So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed [SHOWD] no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment. What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew [SHOW] me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith [SETH], Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab [RAY-hob] the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “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.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ~~¶~~ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Since the Protestant Reformation, there has been in Western theology a dispute over the rôles played in our salvation by, respectively, our faith and our good works. The classic Protestant emphasis is to play up the overwhelming significance of faith and to downplay the significance of works, sometimes even to the point of disparaging works entirely. We can see this emphasis in the devastating impact of the epithet “works righteousness”, which is just about the most denigrating charge that can be hurled at a Protestant religious leader.

This knee-jerk tendency to privilege faith understands that “faith” solely as the vocally-expressed belief in the person and salvific work of Christ. This is the origin, for example, of the so-called “altar call” that is such a prominent feature of Protestant revival services – something which, parenthetically, has always struck me as a bit odd, considering that the worship spaces in which these “altar calls” are made are almost always devoid of anything that could be mistaken for an actual altar. But that is an issue for exploration in another sermon, not in this one.

Have you ever been approached by someone who told you something like, “I became a Christian on April 19, 1973” or some similar date? And who then reached into his wallet or her purse and pulled out a card inscribed with that date? I have met such people and I am sure that many of you have as well and a moment’s reflection will show that their concept of Christian salvation has been formed by precisely and solely that “altar call” tradition.

“Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ”, declares roundly that:

“They also are to be had assured that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, where by men must be saved.”⁶

With that groundwork laid, the twelfth Article, “Of Good Works”, deals with the otherwise vexed question of the place this scheme leaves for good works:

Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.”⁷

Conclusion:

And there you have it: while we are saved by Faith, the reality of our Faith may be judged by looking at the quality of our works which are motivated by that Faith. And that is the explanation for our Baptist friends’ words devoted to Faith and their plethora of boards, commissions, and agencies devoted to good works.

All that was ever needed to resolve the debate over faith *versus* works was this Chapter from the Epistle of James, which may very well be why Martin Luther was so exercised over this Epistle:

a man who was crossing a street when he was hit by a car that had zoomed around the corner. As he lay in the street, injured, a Beatnik walked over and looked down at him. The accident victim looked up and begged piteously, “Call me an ambulance,” to which the Beatnik responded by snapping his fingers and declaring, “Like man, you’re an ambulance.”

You will have no trouble in seeing the parallel between that old joke and my text for today, which asks how we have helped the cold and hungry if we tell them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled.” These are the ultimate examples of form over function, for in each case, the ones in need received, in *literal* terms, precisely what is was for which they had asked while, in each case, what they received was, in *practical* terms, utterly useless to them.

As is so often the case with apparent contradictions in theology, the resolution to the debate over the place in salvation of faith *versus* works may be found in the sturdy good sense of the drafters of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. There, the twenty-second Article, “Of Purgatory”, comes down decisively on the side of Luther’s judgement concerning Purgatory and indulgences, as it declares:

“The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God.”⁵

Be very careful to note, however, that what this Article denounces is what it terms “the Romish Doctrines”, by which it means the popular religion of the 16th Century “man in the street”, not the official teachings of the Church Catholic.

Having thus dispatched Purgatory and the use of reliques and images to buy one’s salvation, the eighteenth Article,

Theme:

Again, for the here and now we will leave aside the question of whether such people have a correct understanding of what it means “to become a Christian”. What is significant for the purposes of this morning’s analysis is that they have firmly located themselves within that Protestant tradition that holds that “faith”, understood to be a conscious personal decision for Christ, is the essential criterion for personal salvation and therefore that good works are, at least in theory, irrelevant to that process of salvation.

But while these good people *say* that is what they believe, and I am convinced they say so sincerely, is it in fact what is shown by their own *conduct*? A moment’s reflection will show, I think, that it is not.

Development:

Where I live in the American Deep South, I am surrounded by overwhelming numbers of Baptists, especially of that faction among the Baptists who are called “Southern Baptists”. Now these Baptists invariably teach, and truly believe, that their salvation is utterly dependent upon this sort of personal choice, what we may call “the Jesus option”. And, if pressed, they would, almost to a man or woman, assure one with all sincerity that good works are irrelevant to their salvation.

Yet, very oddly when one considers that assertion, these same Baptists maintain an elaborate and highly efficient structure of eleemosynary works. Almost every single one of them tithes, and by “tithe” I mean an absolute minimum of ten per cent of their gross incomes, and those tithes support numerous schools, colleges, seminaries, home missions, foreign missions, programs to feed, clothe, and house the homeless, and every imaginable sort of charitable enterprise. In other words, these same Baptists, who describe

themselves as – and who sincerely consider themselves to be – people exclusively of faith, and not of works, are outstanding examples of good works in action.

Much the same thing is true of most of the people whom we used to call “mainstream Protestants”, wherever in the world we may find them. So how do we account for this dichotomy, between their words, which are exclusively about faith, and their actions, which are reflexively and extensively about good works?

As I hinted before, to answer this apparent conundrum, we must look back to the Protestant Reformation. As with so much that was characteristic of that Reformation, the key to understanding this particular issue lies in the personal history of the Augustinian friar and university professor of New Testament, Martin Luther.

Luther was deeply concerned by various corruptions that had crept into Medieval popular piety, such as the emphasis on pilgrimages, relics of the saints, and, especially, the sale of “indulgences”, that is, to use a term from the game of “Monopoly”, of “Get Out of Jail Free” cards that were tied to the exclusively Western, and rather late-developing, doctrine of “Purgatory” as a purifying intermediate state between earth and heaven.

A few years ago, there was a marvelous movie made that documents Luther’s spiritual journey, from his famous sheltering under a tree in a torrential storm to his disenchantment during a pilgrimage to the most decadent iteration of late Renaissance Rome. It was from these experiences that Luther came to reject anything he saw as empty “works” and, therefore, came to see faith alone as the key to salvation.

Among my favorite scenes in that movie are the ones in which the great English actor, Peter Ustinov, portrayed

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Luther’s patron, the Elector of Saxony, brooding happily like a miser over his museum containing an immense collection of supposed relics of the saints, all of which had been acquired at great effort and expense and all of which were, of course, completely fraudulent.

So in his urgency to direct people away from the frauds and fancies of late Medieval piety, Luther completely rejected any saving value in good works, on the ground that we can do nothing ourselves to promote our salvation in any way but must instead depend completely on God’s freely grace. This even led him to reject the Epistle of James as being worthy to be counted among the canonical Scriptures; it is, he claimed, “a right strawy Epistle”, meaning it has no more food for our souls than empty straw that is given to animals which need nourishing hay.

In this, however, Luther, like many reformers before him and after him, went too far. His reaction against the abuses he saw around him was so extreme that, like a ship rocked in a seaway, he tilted to the same extreme degree to the other side, and in doing so, I think, managed to make personal expressions of faith, like the “altar call” to which we have already referred, into sometimes empty rituals, that is, into a form of “works righteousness” themselves.

Let me give you an illustration of what I mean by this, of which today’s Second Lesson reminded me. Here in the United States and back in the 1950s, when I was very much younger than I am now, there was a subculture of deliberate dropouts from mainstream society whom we called the Beatniks. This name was taken from Jack Kerouac and the so-called “Beat Poets”, combined with a Russian suffix taken from the “Sputnik” satellites with which we were preoccupied at the time.

These Beatniks affected a Zen-like detachment from the material world and one of the jokes about them involved

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