

Luke 10: 25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

James 2:1-9,14-26, 3:1-2,13-18

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham

believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Last week I spoke about faith, and about relying on the faithfulness of Christ. If you were here, you may remember that I asked you, "What loving, caring thing would you attempt, if you truly knew in your bones that God would make sure you were eventually all right, no matter how it came out?" Then I asked you, "What's stopping you?"

Remember that, I'll come back to it.

Salvation by faith and salvation by works were one of the defining fights of the Reformation. At the extremes, one side claimed that, if you participated in the sacraments of the Church, from baptism, through confession and absolution and communion and last rites, then you were going to Heaven. Period. No matter what else you said or did in the world. The other claimed that none of those sacraments really mattered, that you were saved based on what you believed in your heart.

Extremes can be a bad thing. They claim to separate things that cannot, in the real world, be separated.

This is one of those Sundays when my job as your pastor is, more clearly than usual, not to tell you new things, but to point out to you what you already know. Believing in God is a good thing. But it is not enough.

I believe that the Earth orbits the Sun. It's what I was taught in school, and it seems to explain the meteorological phenomena that I see every day. But, to be honest, I don't put a lot of thought into it, and this belief does not change my actions much on a day-to-day basis.

I believe that the stars in the sky are really balls of burning gas millions and millions of miles away. But my life would not really be much different if I believed that they were pinpricks in the vast black cloak that surrounded the world.

I believe that air is a thing, rather than air being just the absence of anything. Even if I can't see it. But, if I didn't believe that, it would probably only affect my life when my car tires were low.

Every time Jesus exorcised a demon from someone, the demons knew exactly who Jesus was. They believed in him. They had no doubt in their minds that he had power. In some cases, they begged him not to use his power. But they did not follow him.

Likewise, there are people today who believe that God exists, and they hate God. They blame God for everything bad that has ever happened, and they refuse to listen to those who tell them that God loves them. They may believe with all their heart, but they are not following Christ.

Believing in God is a good thing. But it is not enough.

If you believe in God and in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit...

If you believe everything we say we believe when we say the Apostles' Creed, but it doesn't really affect your life every day, then I have some bad news for you.

You don't have faith. You have an academic belief. Like believing that the Earth goes around the Sun, rather than vice-versa.

There was a saying common in the 1970's that has some truth to it: "If you were arrested tomorrow for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"<sup>1</sup> Think about what it would mean, if a court declared that there was reasonable doubt and acquitted you of the charge of being a Christian.

"If your brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and you say to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, then what good is that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."<sup>2</sup>

If a single mother cannot earn enough by working full-time to pay for her little kids' childcare that allows her to work, and you say to her, "Take some personal responsibility!", and yet you do nothing to help change her situation, then what good is that? No matter how she got to this point, her children suffer. "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

If a person has been kicked out of their home at gunpoint and told to leave their home country at once or be killed, and you say to them, "Live a good life, and take care of yourself," and you do nothing to help such refugees, then what good is that? "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Christian faith, if does not fundamentally change your life, is dead. If you view Christianity as "moderately important,"<sup>3</sup> then you have missed the point and you have missed the boat.

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<sup>1</sup> I have searched for the original source for this quote; I have been unable to find it.

<sup>2</sup> James 2:15-17

<sup>3</sup> "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." -- C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (1970).

If you want reassurance that you don't need to change and that living whatever way you want is OK, then I suggest you find a faith other than Christianity. I hear that the religion or philosophy of Ayn Rand is good for that sort of thing: it claims that selfishness is a virtue and the best life is entirely, "self-agenda-ed." But, if you're going to do that, please don't confuse people by calling yourself a Christian.

If, on the other hand, you're feeling left out here: you do not feel faith in your heart, you don't see your fellow human beings as brothers and sisters, you don't feel called to do something in the world, and you wish you did, ... there is a solution.

Start doing, and then you will start seeing glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven. Come help with HM3. Volunteer at the food pantry or the library or the hospital. Wherever you are loving and helping to take care of your neighbors. If you do that, you will start to see these glimpses of the Kingdom, and you'll get hooked. Faith will come into your heart, and it will transform you.

Living faith will take you to where you cannot return. Once you have faith, you cannot return to being the same person you were before.

If you have living faith, then your life will not be solely about you, or even about that favorite justification for doing nothing, your children. I love my kids very much, and they know that, but my life is not solely about them.

If you have living faith, you will see other people as your brothers and sisters. Even those who don't look like you or talk like you or belong to "your tribe." For they are your fellow children of God.

If you see them as your brothers and sisters, that changes how you interact with them. You will find yourself happy when they are happy, and sad when they are sad. You will find yourself sad and angry when they are mistreated.

As a result, you will look to do something about it. You will look for ways to help take care of your neighbors. And remember who Jesus said your neighbors were. The Jews in the time of Jesus hated the Samaritans, and vice versa, more than Americans hate the Russians, or the North Koreans. I think you might have to go back to World War Two to find that kind of relationship between peoples. And Jesus said that the Samaritan was the Jewish man's neighbor.

If you have living faith, then you will know that God loves you, and wants you to be well. That means that God will give you the courage to speak God's Truth, even if your voice shakes, and to love God's children, even if some of them scare you.

You will seek out God's holy *shalom*, the peace that passes our understanding. God's *shalom*, or peace and abundance, can only happen if your neighbors have it, too. If you have *shalom*, then you are secure in your life, because you have enough, and your neighbors have enough. They have no need to take what you have.

The rewards for living with real Christian faith are amazing. You get to see glimpses of the Kingdom of God, right here, right now. When a member comes back to worship with us after having been in the hospital, and tells of feeling all the prayers that helped her get through a medical ordeal, that is a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. When we baptize a child, and the whole congregation promises to love that child and to help teach him what it is to be a Christian, that is a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. When we see the smile on a person's face when we fill their plate at HM3, that is a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Living faith produces works in the world. If the faith in your heart is real and alive, you will find yourself doing good things in the world. You can't help it.

I'll ask two questions again.

“What loving, caring thing would you attempt, if you truly knew in your bones that God would make sure you were eventually all right, no matter how it came out?”

“What's stopping you?”

AMEN