

Sermon on James 2, 14-26, 02.04.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

14)What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? 15)If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, 16)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? 17)So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. 18)But someone 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. 19)You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder. 20)Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? 22)You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works, 23)and the scripture was fulfilled which says: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”; and he was called a friend of God. 24)You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25)And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26)For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from the works is dead.

Dear Congregation,

even Martin Luther said that this letter is actually a piece of the New Testament, to which “his spirit , does not want to submit”. – “An epistle of straw” he has called this letter. And so, we as Lutherans could just simply say: “Well, then, this is supposedly nothing for us, for if Martin Luther says that, then we need not, in the least, bother with it.”

This is as far as theory is concerned, now what about practice. This letter is contained in the New Testament, it was not removed from the context of the Bible even during the time of the Reformation; and Martin Luther has translated this letter, too. Therefore, it is not that simple.

Some say: What this letter expresses, the context described in this paragraph, which I have just read to you, does not at all fit into Evangelical faith, which indeed is based on the fact that not works, but faith counts. This is what we read in Paul’s writings: “He who through faith is righteous shall live” (Romans 1, 17) – a quote from Habakkuk, chapter 2, verse 4, which Paul repeats. Therefore, if faith alone justifies, for what reason do we need works then? And actually, was not the problem exactly that which Martin Luther has uncovered and which led to the Reformation; namely, that people thought, if one is diligent in doing good works, then one goes to heaven? And that has ultimately led to a situation that people occupied themselves only with how one could do good works; and they did all kinds of things, as absurd as they were, because they thought they could influence God to be merciful. The indulgence trade was also built on instilling a bad conscience in people, by telling them, you do not do enough, and one offered them a way out and invited them to donate money to buy a place in heaven. How perverse was that?

Alright. And yet, this is about something else, which is not a contradiction to what Paul said. I want to explain this briefly to you: Paul said: The law, the commandments, cannot justify us, because we cannot obey them. The only thing that can justify us before God is God himself, is faith which is given to us by him, through which we recognize that Jesus has died for us and has, on the cross, taken on our sin. Right, this is the justification through faith. But the Letter of James does not at all dispute this. While Paul looks heavenwards and says: What do we need to stand justified before God?, the Letter of James asks: Where does faith lead, what are its results, what are its consequences? What can we do for our fellow human beings? Paul looks upwards, the Letter of James, however, looks sideways, to the left and right. For James it

is not about a person justifying himself through a good deed, but it is about not stopping at piety, and faith “inciting” to do good works. The Bible study group has understood this superbly this week, and the participants have said: It depends on the sequence: Not the works come first and faith through them, but faith first and then, as a result, the good works.

Now hopefully, we have clarified this. Therefore, to do something out of faith is what this letter suggests to us. So what do we do then?

I have to mention beforehand, that I am sometimes surprised, that people have not much to say to this question. I don’t even really know, what the reason for this speechlessness is, when one puts the question to fellow Christians:” What can we as Christians do now? What is our responsibility, when it is about giving form to our faith? How could other people notice at all, that we act as Christians?”

I think, the fact that we cannot come up with an answer to this question quickly, has to do with two things: First, as Christians we are used to being asked more often: Do you believe? And, with due respect for faith, I have the impression, that the answer to this is easy for us. Do I believe, yes, of course! – That someone could ask us, what we actually do with our faith, is a question, which is not often put to us. This is the one thing.

The other is, that we all probably notice that the question, how does your faith actually take form, what do you do for your neighbour, is a question that makes us realize immediately that this is now serious. We cannot as easily escape this imposition as the question: Do you believe. Even though many people cannot really say in what they believe, most try to evade the question: what do you do with your faith, because here one can no longer hide behind an answer. It is a close call, for if I say: Actually, I do nothing, then I would have to admit, according to the definition of the Letter of James, that I really do not believe. The letter says in a disagreeable way: There is no work-sharing. It is not possible that the someone says, I have faith and another says, that is okay, for I have the good works. One does not exist without the other. Even though faith is there first, this hen has to lay an egg at some time, if you understand, what I mean.

What do you do out of faith?

Dear Congregation,

The unfair thing in this sermon will be, that I will not answer this question. That you must do yourself. And that is all but fitting, because I think there are as many answers to this question as there are people. Everyone has to discover for himself what it is, that faith drives him to do. I just want to instill into your hearts that you, in fact, answer this question for yourself, because, if you don’t do this, when you go to church and there are no noticeable consequences afterwards, then you are in the wrong place here. We receive “only” instructions here, and have to do something with them out there, in this world, in our family, in our life. And I shall tell you also why:

The best reason I can think of is, that God has done everything for you and me, what he indeed could do, so that we can actually believe in a meaningful way. We like to push this aside, because it is quite unpleasant to imagine that Jesus died a very agonizing death, to save us, you and me. As much as I am against Mel Gibson’s film “The Passion of Christ” for theological reasons – I am certain that, if you have seen the film, you can not lightly ignore what it has cost God to give you faith in God’s mercy, his love and eternal life. That is not something that we can simply take for granted. Faith is a gift, yes, but have we looked closely at the fact, what this gift had cost?

The second thing is founded in the context of the Letter of James:

15)If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, 16)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?

Praying is important – to be pious is important – to read the Bible is important, but then, not to help people in need... what is that? What would it help to be pious, if people in actual need would still not receive help which they need desperately? Would that not be inhuman? Would that not be a neglect of aid, an offence toward the neighbour, a sin?

As far as I am concerned, only then can we think of spirituality and would not need to do good works, when there would be no more need out there.

I do not keep it a secret that, to me, especially the aid for people in need is immensely important. Not because it is *my* idea, but because it has been, from the beginning, the characteristic of Christian congregations. The care for the poor, the widows and orphans is the theme of the congregation. Just read the Gospel of Luke, read Psalm 82, the Prophets like Amos and Isaiah. What does Jesus do, what does he preach? Love of the neighbour! – We cannot behave here as if this had nothing to do with us – do you understand this?

Why is this world the way it is? Why is there so much cruelty and badness, what do you think? – Is the answer: Because the problems are so great and, unfortunately, one cannot do anything about them? Or because there might not be enough money to solve the problems? Or whatever explanations there may be? – No! The world is the way it is, because there are too few people who do good works.

How many people does it take to do good in this world? Every single one. That means, that there must be more of us who do good. However, it also means that everyone of us can make a difference already.

I have to admit to you in all honesty, that I suffer, because we find this so difficult. Our guilt in the rich countries of the north and the west consists of doing so little to end the misery in the world. We prefer to watch. We prefer to secure our standard of living, we prefer to think badly of poor people, than to contribute effectively to change their situation.

How often have we protested in the church against poverty? What do we think about the millions in Africa, who die every year from HIV/Aids, 500,000 children among them? What would we say, if these were our children? What would we say, if we, as 78 year olds, would have to take care of our grandchildren, because our children have all been buried in their graves? – These are only a few examples.

Are we in all sincerity of the opinion that there would be nothing to do for us in this world? Do we truly believe that we must only be pious and that all the extraordinarily disturbing and oppressive facts have nothing to do with us?

What shall we do, dear sisters and brothers? What shall we do? – Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.