

Two Oars in the Water

**St. Mark Lutheran
Three Services**

**Pastor Ken Welsh
Oct. 9, 2016**

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in 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 good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." James 2:14-17

An old Scotsman operated a little rowboat for transporting passengers. One day a passenger noticed that the old man had carved on one oar the word "Faith" and on the other oar the word "Works". Curiosity led him to ask the meaning of these oars. The old man was a Christian, and thankful for the opportunity to share something. He said, "I will show you."

So he dropped one oar into the boat and just used the oar called "Works". The boat just went around in circles. Then he dropped that oar into the boat and used the oar called "Faith" instead. The little boat just went around in circles again, but this time the other way around.

After this demonstration, the old man picked up "Faith" and "Works" and began rowing with both oars together. The boat sped swiftly over the water. The Scotsman explained to his passenger, "You see, that is the way it is in the Christian life. Dead works without faith are useless, and faith without works is dead also, getting you nowhere. But faith and works pulling together result in progress, and blessings." (from a sermon by Dennis Davidson, Authentic Faith Works, 10/26/2009)

Our text today clearly proclaims that faith should result in Christian action. It says, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

If this statement makes you feel uncomfortable, you probably have lots of company. This seems to be a difficult teaching for many Christians to understand. Many of us grew up being warned, and for good reason, not to trust in our good works for salvation. We have probably heard over and over that good works do not save us and we should avoid trusting in "work righteousness" for our salvation. Titus 3:4 clearly backs this up: "...he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior..."

So the theologians who have warned us to beware of "work righteousness" are

on solid ground, but there is another danger here. The end result with some people is that they have forgotten that faith does have an action component to it. A proper faith prompts us to be involved in "doing" our part, not to get into heaven, but in response to what God has done for us.

This has strong Biblical support also and from the words of Jesus himself. In Luke 6:46 he asks, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?" In Matthew 7 today, Jesus states, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Ever more memorable was the time our Lord Jesus was in Bethany. Early in the morning he was hungry, and he saw a fig tree by the road, and he went up to it to get something to eat. But the fig tree had nothing on it except leaves. And Jesus said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" This really got the disciples attention, because the fig tree soon withered and died. It was a lesson for them, and it is a lesson for us. A fig tree is expected to have fruit or there is no reason for its existence. A Christian is expected to have fruit in his life also.

I have no problem with the statement, "Faith without works is dead." There may be some exceptions to the general rule, but God in his wisdom and mercy surely knows what those are. In general, our faith should result in good works done to bring glory to the Lord who has saved us. And while service in the local congregation has merit and is a fine thing, our good works are not to be just limited to things done in the organized church. God brings people into our lives and we make decisions on whether we are going to help them or not. There are charities outside the church which are also deserving of support. There are causes outside the church worthy of support.

Once a year here at St. Mark we believe that it is fitting that we examine our response to God's love as far as the stewardship of our time, talents or gifts, and treasures is concerned. We are caretakers of the time, talents, and treasures that God has given to us. We don't really give to God. But in faith we return part of what he has given to us in those areas.

Last week Pastor Mark stressed one of the best uses of our time, that of pouring our efforts into the lives of other people, by helping them, by molding them, or by mentoring them in areas in which they need support. He asked us to remember some of the people in our lives that have helped us get where we are in life today. God often works through human relationships to help or to transform the lives of others. Don't overlook such opportunities; they are something special.

Today we ask you to examine what gifts and abilities God has given you. There are some special gifts and talents mentioned in the Bible, and they are important in the church, but they are not exclusive lists. If you can walk, talk, and see, you have been gifted. Let nobody hear you saying there is nothing you can do, unless

you are flat on your back and can hardly move.

We have included a list of service opportunities here at St. Mark in your service folder today. (Is there anyone who has not received one?) Please review the list. If you are presently serving the Lord in some way, we ask that you write that at top of your commitment sheet that is also enclosed today. Please include your name and phone number. We ask that you return this at one of our "Commitment" services next Sunday.

The second or middle section of the commitment form is for anyone interested in joining a new ministry. This is especially good for new members or those who have transferred into St. Mark in the last twelve months. Some are already involved in a ministry, but if you are not, carefully review the list of service opportunities. In addition, pay particular attention to the IMPORTANT NEEDS AT ST. MARK found in the service folders today. You can also make it a goal to join a new Bible study group during the year. Please make sure to sign your name and phone number at the top. Bring it with you next Sunday, and if you don't plan to be here next Sunday, either turn it in today or mail it to the church office.

The sheet actually needs to be torn in two before it is turned in. The lower half is not to be signed. It is your financial commitment (or goal) to support the Lord's work, between you and the Lord. Keep in mind that proportionate giving is taught in both the Old and New Testaments. Proverbs 3:9 says, "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops." The key words here are "honor" and "first fruits". First fruits were the best and choicest. The Lord did not want leftovers.

The New Testament also speaks to proportionate giving. 1 Corinthians 16:2, states, "On the first day of the week, each of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income." This can also be done on the first day of the month; it's the same idea. You see God wants you to set aside what you are willing to return to him first. This puts Him first and he is in a position then to bless how you spend the rest of the money trusted to you. The alternative is to give to God what is left over, if anything. I have done it both ways. The first way works. You can't out give God. It is a matter of trusting him first or trusting yourself. When you follow his advice, the Bible indicates you can expect to be blessed.

So let's wind it all up this morning by asking ourselves, "Do I have two oars in the water? Are both "faith" and "works" a part of my spiritual life? We grant that saving faith is a gift of God, but it comes through the Word and is maintained and strengthened by regular hearing of the word and partaking of holy communion. If we take that seriously, and if we take doing works for the Lord seriously, we can expect to be moving forward in our life and to be blessed. To God be the glory, Amen.