

But now we need to ask, is this fine point of theology really worth protesting over? Why was Sola Fide such a big deal to the reformers? Well, here's five things that are at stake.

First, Biblical Christianity is distinct from every other religion in that it is centered on what God has done for us, rather than on human achievement. Christians should be humble and meek because our salvation was not earned.

Second, a belief in the need for works in addition to faith reduces Jesus to a second-rate saviour. But scripture clearly teaches that Jesus' work on the cross is "finished" work – when we say we need our own works too we're undermining Christ's power to save us fully and finally.

Third, a belief in a "faith plus works" formula undermines the ability of the gospel to be for all people. Why? Because works are easier for some than they are for others. Those with greater resources, more leisure time, and more ability or capacity will be able to do greater works. Are they also more saved? Surely not. A handicapped child is as saved as an able-bodied wealthy man. There is no hierarchy of salvation in God's economy.

Fourth, there's the problem of motive – why are you doing good? Is it to get into heaven? Is it to get something from God? We so quickly become ungodly in our godly pursuits when our motives are not right. Salvation by faith alone results in grateful humble Christians, motivated to do good simply as a response to God's grace.

And finally, faith plus works creates a problem of assurance – can we ever truly rest in the knowledge of our salvation? Or do we live forever in the anxiety of wondering "have I done enough, am I good enough, and is God pleased with me enough?"

Charles Spurgeon once said, "They fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick. Why? For Christ's sake, because it was the sweetest thing in the world to do anything for Jesus. They did it because they delighted in

doing it; because they could not help doing it; because their new nature impelled them to do it."

"Faith without deeds is dead," James says. We show that we have faith by our deeds.

Tim Keller once said, "Mercy to the full range of human needs is such an essential mark of a Christian that it can be used as a test of true faith. Mercy is not an optional addition to being a Christian. Rather, a life poured out in deeds of mercy is the sign of genuine faith. If there is no mercy toward the needy, then there is no faith. Acts of mercy are evidence of salvation."

And so, the question is, are you saved? Has the power of sin and death been defeated in your life? How do you know? Because deep in your heart is a desire to do something. If God's power resides in your heart that will cause you to do things, to act differently, to love and serve and sacrifice in His name.

If that still small voice is not there today, fear not. It's not far away. Perhaps God has arranged this day for just this purpose. Today is the day to pray – to confess your sins, to repent and to put your trust in the One who can overcome all that is broken in your life and in the world.

Let him begin the work of salvation. Let him change you from the inside out. Let him be your only hope. And then, slowly and sure, the love of God, the justice of God, and the righteousness of God will begin to flow through you. Not perfectly – perfection is reserved for the new creation. But more and more, you will see your faith manifesting it in your living. Your faith will begin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to come alive.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Faith Works: Faith Produces Deeds"

June 30th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: James 2:14-26

By Rev. Mike Putnam

What kind of Christian are you?

How do you define your beliefs? Well, there are all kinds of ways to do that. We can define ourselves by the denomination to which we belong – we belong to the United Church of Canada. But that's pretty vague – within the United Church there is a great diversity of belief and from one church to another you will find wildly different expressions of faith.

So instead, you could define yourself by your own personal viewpoint. "Well, for me, what matters most is...and then fill in the blank. But a Christian is never a Christian alone. We belong to a great and sweeping tradition – we are formed by various people and thought forms and we didn't (I hope) make it up for ourselves. So no, we can't very well stand alone as isolated individuals boldly forging our own faith.

I would say, we would be best to define ourselves as protestant Christians. We belong to the great tradition of those who became reformed in the 16th-century. Our set of beliefs are largely influenced by that great theological division that happened as a result of a return to a Biblical centered faith.

But if we're protestant Christians, we should probably know what are we protesting against? Why aren't we Roman Catholic Christians? Why don't we have a pope? Why don't we pray to the Mother Mary? Why don't we have priests and the mass as our central religious activity?

Well, the answer to those questions is that the reformers of the 16th-century went back to biblical basics. They believed that the Roman Catholic church had accrued a number of unbiblical and unhelpful teachings. So, the reformers wanted to get back to the simple faith of Jesus Christ and to shed all the other stuff that had been added on over the

centuries.

And one of the things that had been added to was the Doctrine of Justification. The Doctrine of Justification answers the question "How am I saved?"

The great reformer, and the founder of the protestant movement, Martin Luther, answered that question with the simple creed, "By faith alone" – "Sola Fide".

But this theological shift was a big deal. Take the Roman Catholic Church on, especially in the 16th-century, and you're bound to face some challenges. Back then, it might even cost you your life.

Martin Luther was excommunicated for his contentious positions; he went into living in exile. But the cat was out of the bag, the horse was out of the barn and the truth and power of scripture had been unleashed, and the church would never be the same again.

The church was forced to respond. An ecumenical council (The council of Trent) was called. And there they soundly rejected Luther's "Sola Fide". How did they do it? They used James chapter 2 to justify faith + works for salvation.

Catholic doctrine maintained that we are saved by Grace and by good works. Want to overcome the problem of your sin? You better get to work doing good. You better contribute something to the equation.

But protestants stand in protest against this idea. We firmly stand as "Sola fide" kinds of Christians.

But if we're protesting the addition of works to the salvation equation – we better understand what James was really saying. Otherwise, we could be wrong. We might well be understanding our faith incorrectly. We might be on the wrong side of the argument – and when it comes to something as important

as our eternal salvation that seems like something worth getting right.

And if we only look at James, we might well conclude we've got it wrong. James chapter 2 verse 24 clearly says, "You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone." Well folks, that sounds pretty cut and dry. Maybe we should be a little nervous.

But we never take one line of the Bible and make such an important determination. We must consider everything the Bible says on the subject – because it is in fact a unified book authored by many people over many years, and yet mysteriously, the symphony is under the direction of the one Holy Spirit.

And so, James chapter 2 verse 24 seems to say one thing, but elsewhere in scripture, Sola Fide is clearly articulated.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."

Romans 3:27 & 28 says the same thing: "Where then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

John 5:24 - Jesus himself says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Jesus also taught that, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29).

So clearly, the New Testament understanding is that salvation is a gift of God – full stop – nothing more to be added or required. There is nothing we contribute to the equation short of our faith in Jesus to do the saving.

But then we're left to contend with James and his chapter 2. Was he wrong? Did

he get it mixed up? Has the scriptural cannon let us down?

Well, protestant Christians would say, no. James isn't saying something different about salvation, he's answering a different question all together. James isn't answering the question, "How do I get saved." He's answering the equally important question, "How do I know I'm saved." And James' answer is very clear – it's the fruit of your life that is the evidence of your saving faith.

How do you know that you have a saving faith? There should be some evidence of it. You should be able to do an inventory of your life and say, yes, I see some evidence here that God is at work in me, which is surely proof that I am saved from the power of sin and death.

And that's exactly what James is showing us in chapter 2. Because assurance of faith is important. Because when you know you are saved it changes you. It settles you. It ends your anxieties. It ends your quest for that "vertical relationship" I'm so often talking about – "Am I right with God?" Assurance says 'yes you are,' and not you are set free from the quest to get right, and instead to focus your energy on the "horizontal relationship." I am right with God and now I'm going to demonstrate my love and devotion to God through my love and devotion to others.

So, James is telling us in chapter 2 that there are three evidences that we have a saving faith. He's showing us how faith alone – sola fide – shows itself in your living.

And the first evidence of a saving faith is good deeds. James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but do nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

In other words, when you have faith in Jesus Christ – the work of God begins to change your heart. That's the whole point of faith.

What's the problem God is fixing in the world? It's not that we don't have the right curriculums in schools, or that we don't have the right laws in our nations, or that we just all need to "get along." The problem – the unsolvable problem – the reason the world isn't getting better and better - is the condition of the human heart. And so, salvation from that problem should be accompanied by evidence that your heart is changing in God's direction. And the things you believe inform the things you do.

The second evidence of saving faith is a growing trust in God and a willingness to obey God. James gives us a Biblical example to show us what this looks like. He says, "Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend."

James is showing us that when we have saving faith, we trust God, we are led by God, and we are willing to do the things God commands. Why? Because now our faith is in Him, not in our own plans and justifications.

Abraham was willing to sacrifice his own son because God required it. Now, of course, God provided a substitute – Isaac was allowed to live – just as God provided a substitute for us – Jesus Christ who stood in our place to pay the penalty for sin.

But even so, Abraham's willingness to obey God's command was evidence of his saving faith. And so it is with us.

Thankfully God does not require us to sacrifice our own children – in fact God's law clearly prohibits it. But when we are willing to

obey God through his word, even when it is challenging, we show that we have saving faith at work in us.

And thirdly, James' final evidence of a saving faith is that your faith is lively and not dead. Again, James gives us an example. He says, "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

What James is saying is that when we have saving faith at work in us it should cause us to do things. Rahab, clearly not a saint by any means – and yet she demonstrated her faith – all that is required for salvation – by caring for the spies sent by God. Did that act save her? No, it was evidence of her faith which had already saved her.

This is what James chapter 2 is all about. James is not telling us "How" to get saved. That's sola fide. What James is showing us is "what happens" when we have saving faith. What happens? Good works.

Martin Luther put it this way, "Faith, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works."

Faith produces deeds – your faith overflows your own life and impacts and affects others in your sphere of living.