

## Faith, Works, and God's Mercy

March 15, 2015

Fourth Sunday of Lent  
Readings: 2 Chronicles 36.14-16, 19-23;  
Ephesians 2.4-10,  
John 3.14-21**By Rev. Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap.**

One of the doctrinal fault lines during the Reformation was the relationship between faith and good works. The Reformers believed that the Catholic Church espoused a doctrine whereby salvation could be achieved through good works – we merit through our good deeds salvation apart from faith. In response to this false notion, the Reformers emphasized, among them especially Martin Luther, that salvation comes through “faith alone.” Paul states that we cannot boast of our works but of our faith: “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rm 3.27-28).

The Catholic Church, particularly at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), countered this argument by stating that it is true that we are justified (made holy) by faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, yet because of our faith, our good deeds done in love contribute to the growth of our holiness and thus further the cause of our salvation.

The Reformers were correct that we are saved and made holy through faith and baptism, and not by keeping the Jewish law, but what they failed to see and to grasp is Paul's exposition of the relationship between faith and good works in his letter to the Ephesians.

It is this reading that the Church places before us today in the liturgy.

### The Father's Work of Merciful Love

Paul tells us that God is so merciful that in his great love for us, “even when we were dead in our transgressions, [he has] brought us to life with Christ – by grace [we] have been saved.”

Sin has separated us from God. God is all-holy and all-good. Sin, the doing of evil, rendered us unholy and thus made us unworthy to live in communion with the all-good and all-holy God.

Moreover, sin itself renders us impotent to rectify the situation. No matter how hard we try, no matter how many good works we think we have done or can perform, we cannot make ourselves holy so as to merit to live with the all-holy and all-loving God. Sin has placed us, if left to our own devices, in a hopeless state.

This is why Paul tells us that it is simply through God's loving mercy that we can be freed from our sin-fraught condition. This is also why John proclaims in his gospel today: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

For both Paul and John, only through the Father's incarnate Son, Jesus, can we obtain salvation. Jesus is the Father's free gift of salvation to us.

Not only did Jesus become man for our salvation, but he achieved our salvation by offering his holy and innocent life to the Father as a loving sacrifice on our behalf for the forgiveness of our sins.

So pleased was the Father with Jesus' sacrifice out of love for us, that he raised Jesus glorious from the dead. As our risen Savior and Lord, Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit upon the world so that we might now share in his holy and risen life. This is why Paul proclaims that the Father has "brought us to life with Christ" and so "raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus."

Thus, we are saved by his grace alone. In all of this saving work the Father has shown "the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

During Lent we behold Jesus crucified and risen, and so we behold the mercy of the Father. During Lent we know and experience the grace that comes to us in and through Jesus Christ, and so we know and experience the love of God his Father. In Lent we abide in the mercy and love of the Father and of Jesus his Son, and so we abide in the mercy and love of the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts.

## Faith in Jesus Christ

If salvation is the Father's free gift of grace given to us through his Son, Jesus, how do we accept this free gift? How do we lay hold of it? How are we brought to holiness of life in Christ Jesus?

Paul is very clear on how this is achieved: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is a gift of God; it is not from works, so no one can boast."

We cannot boast in our good works – the boast that we have merited salvation on our own. No, salvation is a free gift. We accept this free gift from the source of our salvation – we place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. By believing in Jesus as the Father's Son, by giving our lives to him as the one in whom we trust, the one who died for our sins and rose for our eternal life – in that faith we accept the free gift of salvation that resides in Jesus alone.

Faith brings us into communion with the risen Jesus, and within that communion of faith we share in the communion of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit unites us to the risen Lord Jesus, and within this union we are cleansed of sin and recreated in the likeness of Jesus, thus sharing in his holiness and goodness. By being transformed into the sons and daughters of the Father, in the likeness of Jesus the Son, we in the Holy Spirit are able to cry out, in communion with Jesus, "Abba, Father!"

What we could not do on our own because of our sin is now possible through our faith in Jesus – living within and so sharing in the communion of life and love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We now share in the very holiness and goodness of God. In this free gift of salvation in Jesus we rejoice as we approach Holy Week and Easter having laid hold of it through faith!

## Created for Good Works

Paul continues with a very important and marvelous statement: "For we are [the Father's] handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them."

Through faith in Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are God's handiwork – created anew in Jesus Christ. We are new creations – made holy once more.

Moreover, we were created anew in Christ Jesus so that we could perform good works – loving deeds. Notice that we do not do these good works alone, but we do them "in Christ Jesus." Because we live in him, we do our good deeds in him.

This is why our good deeds contribute to our growth in holiness. We do our good deeds in communion with Jesus who is all-holy, and so the good deeds we do foster our own holiness. As we perform acts of love, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, mercy, and so on, we grow in holiness – we grow more into the image of Jesus himself – for we are doing them as living members of Christ's body and so sharing in the holiness of his body. Thus, by all loving acts done within our families, among our friends, or to complete strangers, we contribute to the fulfillment of our salvation. We are, like Jesus himself, doing the deeds of righteousness – deeds done in the Holy Spirit.

These, as Paul says, are the deeds that God has prepared us to do. These are the deeds that he wants us to do. These are the holy deeds that make us holy.

Paul concludes by telling us that “we should live in them [our good deeds].” Our lives should be filled with good and loving deeds. These deeds of charity and mercy, of kindness and generosity, should define who we are. They should be the hallmark of our lives. Our good deeds should be our pride and boast – a boasting not in ourselves but in Jesus Christ, for only in him, by his grace, are our good deeds done.

## Conclusion

So we now see clearly how faith and works form the totality of our Christian life. Lent is precisely the time when we strive to grow in our faith and so strive to do the good works of God through our fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. During Lent we recognize that through faith in Jesus we are made holy, and thus, in Jesus, we bear the fruit of faith – our good and loving deeds.

When we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, let us renew our faith in him and ask him to nourish in us the life of the Holy Spirit, so that we are able to perform the loving deeds that the Father desires of us and has already prepared us to do. Then we will anticipate the great feasts of Holy Week and Easter and in so doing anticipate here on earth our life in heaven, when, with all the saints and angels, we will fully love Jesus and one another forever.

### *About the Author*

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## FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2012* (November 3, 2011), available at:  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/lent](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/lent)

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1987-2029, available at:  
[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm)

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (October 31, 1999), available at:  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents)

"Reward and Merit," available at:  
<http://www.catholic.com/tracts/reward-and-merit>

Rev. James Schall, S.J., "Faith and Deeds: An Augustinian Sermon" (August 30, 2010), available at:  
<http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2010/print2010>

Russell Shaw, "Two Great Heresies of the Reformation," available at:  
<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=909>

### IN SHORT . . .

- ***We are justified by faith in Jesus, yet because of our faith, our good deeds done in love contribute to the growth of our holiness and further the cause of our salvation.***
- ***Sin rendered us unholy and made us unworthy to live in communion with the all-good and all-holy God.***
- ***By believing in Jesus and giving our lives to him as the one who died for our sins and rose for our eternal life, we accept the free gift of salvation that resides in Jesus alone.***
- ***We were created anew in Christ Jesus so that we could perform good works – loving deeds – not alone, but “in Christ Jesus.”***
- ***As we perform acts of love, we grow more into the image of Jesus himself, as living members of Christ’s body and so sharing in the holiness of his body.***
- ***Our good deeds should be our pride and boast – not in ourselves but in Jesus Christ, for only in him, by his grace, are our good deeds done.***