

Once I'm saved, what difference does it make how I live?

If I am already a citizen of heaven, and if my every past sin and every sin in the future are covered by the blood of Christ, what does it matter how I live here on earth?

Have you ever been tempted by thoughts like these? Have you ever used the grace in which you stand as a license to sin, telling yourself that as long as you have faith, nothing else matters? Then know this: What we do here matters. It matters to us, to God and to the rest of the world. It matters for our brothers and sisters in Christ, for our children who learn from us the patterns of living under Christ, and for their children yet unborn, because the ones who will shape them have been shaped by us, as we are shaped by God.

A new school year begins at First Good Shepherd a week from Monday. These pews will fill again with families who are not members here,
and we will be witnessed
as well as witnesses.

What witness will we give to the life of faith? What will those who watch us witness?

If one were to look to the witness of the heroes of faith who populate our epistle lesson for today, here is what that person would see:

Abel's faith did not prevent his older brother's vicious attack, but it is the first example in Scripture of faith that is confident, obedient, blessed and sure, pleasing to God even in the presence of those hostile to it.

It is faith like that shown by the three young men about to be cast into the furnace of fire, who were asked, "Do you think your God will save you from these flames?" They answered, "He certainly can save us from this fiery furnace if it is his will to do so, but even if he does not, he is still our God, and either way, he is delivering us from you."

In Enoch, they would see closeness to God that is uninterrupted, even by death. The faith of Noah was obedience in reverential awe, trusting the word of God over the evidence of his senses, not knowing what God was talking about, but caring only that it was God who was talking. And Abraham, by faith, lived in tents but trusted the one who promised a city with foundations laid by God, too old to be blessed with a child yet trusting the God who said that by the child who would come from his body all the world would be blessed.

How can you have a faith such as these people had?

It is given to you, by the Holy Spirit, when He brings you to salvation.

Nothing we do here as the community of God will save us; only the grace of God, active in faith, can do that.

Evil works destroy faith, but good works cannot create or preserve faith.

The Holy Spirit urges and empowers the Christian to avoid the evil and perform the good. The reason evil works can be the wreck of faith is that they constantly thwart and resist the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Good works do not sustain or invigorate faith; faith sustains and invigorates good works. Good works cannot make your faith stronger or better; they are simply the natural outcome, the fruit of the life in Christ. We do good works as naturally as a fruit tree brings forth fruit.

You know the verse, but have you seen how well Ephesians 2:8-9 reads in our new pew Bibles? We haven't come across it so far this year in our Scripture readings. In fact, we won't do so for quite a while. It is assigned for the Fourth Sunday in Lent for two years from now, but it is such an important Bible verse for all Christians that you know we will be quoting it again and again. You might want to look it up right now, on page 976 in the pew Bible:

“For by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

So it is not that salvation is the result of works; works are the result of salvation. Verse 10: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Faith is the root;
works are but the fruit.

A tree could never hope that if only it could bear enough fruit, it would eventually grow some roots.

Without the root,
there is no fruit.

Faith is the root; works are but the fruit. And yet, the fruit matters. It makes a difference. Our good works make a difference that matters to us.

They assure us of our faith, reminding us of the state of grace in which we stand – good ground for works. They give glory to our Father who is in heaven, and they often act as answers to our neighbors' prayers, as we serve God whom we cannot see by serving His children, whom we can.

We are odd sorts of trees, never knowing precisely what fruit we will bear, but knowing that the fruit will come. It is by the Father's gift that we have faith, faith that honors God; trusts His promises; and depends on His grace. Without fear. For we know it is the Father's will to give us the Kingdom . . .and its fruit.

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