

“JUDGED BY THE LAW OF LIBERTY”

Proper 18 B September 6, 2009

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146;

James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

Introduction:

Last week I tried to make a strong case that it is futile to try and work ourselves into heaven. The entrance standard is simply too tough. I discussed the Pharisees, who did consider themselves perfect because they thought they kept the entire Old Testament Law; and, I mentioned, the constant conflicts they had with Jesus.

The Pharisees were obnoxious to the average person – always flaunting their religious perfection; yet, Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 5:20, that unless their righteousness surpassed that of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law, they would not be able to enter Heaven. How would people understand such a concept? Be more perfect even than the Pharisees? Forget that notion.

I mentioned how Jesus reminded the Pharisees that God looks deeper than outward appearances or works done trying to impress God. God looks at the inner person - what motivates us, what secret feelings we are covering up, what judgmental thoughts we are harboring, etc. Jesus illustrated how God looks deep into the soul by telling the Pharisees that to hate a brother is the same as committing murder, and to lust for a woman is the

same as committing adultery with her in the heart (Mt.5).

After teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount, about God's entrance standards for going to Heaven, Jesus said this to all who were listening: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" In this one statement, Jesus teaches us that

The Standard For Perfection is God, Himself.

Last week, I asked: "Who is Perfect? Which one of us has any reasonable chance of becoming a perfect person? And, even if you had the understanding, the courage, the discipline needed to break every bad habit, capture every lustful, hurtful, mean-spirited thought and motivation the millisecond it occurs – and you were, somehow, able to make yourself into a perfect person – you would still be guilty for your imperfections before you became perfect."

It's an impossible situation. Once you've sinned – you've sinned. You are, therefore, a sinner. As it says in today's lesson from James: *For whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*" The truth is, Sinners need forgiveness. Perfect people do not need forgiveness because they have never sinned – ever, ever, ever!

This is why God sent Jesus from Heaven to

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earth. First, Jesus did live a perfect human life. There was nothing in Jesus' life that needed forgiveness: not one thought, not one word; not one action; not one failure to act in obedience to God's prompting. Jesus fulfilled on Earth what He had been in Heaven – He became a perfect, righteous human being – God in human flesh. This is why Jesus is the greatest person to ever live. This is why He is worthy of worship; and why we pray in His name.

We give our lives to Jesus and He cleans us up – some more than others – so that we are capable of doing good. In Jesus, we don't do good things to justify ourselves, or to impress others. That was the way of the Old Testament. Christians should do good things because goodness now resides in us, and is helping us become a better person.

This week's lesson from James offers the antidote to working our way into heaven. It is to **Speak and Act As Those Who Are to Be Judged By The Law of Liberty.**

As James says in 2:13, *Mercy triumphs over judgment.* The clearest teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus is our Savior but we need to accept him as such. We need to believe in Him and follow in his

footsteps. This active faith in Christ puts us in a position to receive God's mercy instead of God's judgment.

For James, to place ourselves in the position where we access God's mercy involves an interweaving of our faith (belief in Jesus Christ), and works that result from our faith. The model is Jesus Himself: Didn't Jesus do many good works such as feeding people, casting demons out of others, and healing people of every type of disease?

Thus, to be an active participant in Jesus' Ministry of Reconciliation means we are going to have faith in Christ as our Savior and Lord, and we are going to do the works for others He would do. So, when the Holy Spirit prompts you to give clothing to someone, or food, or medicine, or visit a sick person, or someone in jail, or help someone find a job, or anything else – it is precisely because that is what Jesus would do if he were present in his flesh body – which he is through you.

Our motto is *Building Bridges From Us To Others, and to God*. I don't know how you would judge this slogan but I see it as active, not passive. You can't build a bridge sitting on a couch thinking about it. It involves planning, financing, purchasing materials, locating the points where it begins and ends, and then

tons of work actually building it.

So it is with the interaction of faith and the works of righteousness. The idea for the work comes from the Holy Spirit because it is what Jesus would do. We trust this leading in our lives because we know it witnesses to what Jesus would do. We then engage ourselves in the work trusting God to lead us to completion; and knowing that the final result is God's responsibility because that is what God wants, that we engage in the work that makes reconciliation possible.

The final results are not our responsibility. As much as we could love anyone, God loves them more. God takes responsibility for the result because initiated the action to begin with. When we have done what God asks, our conscience is clear and we know we are in God's will. Thus, we are not judged by the Law of Perfect Works, but rather, the Law of Liberty.

It all begins with us understanding we cannot work our way into heaven. Salvation is a gift from God to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Once we believe and begin to grow in Christ and become serious Christians – God leads us into the works of righteousness: doing good deeds for others that Jesus Himself would do and wants done.

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If you want this relationship with Jesus simply ask Him to fill your soul and forgive your sin as you receive Him in the sacrament of Holy Communion.