

Gifts after Christmas

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and greetings from Oosburg Christian Reformed Church.! Thank you all for being here today.

! Come, Holy Spirit, anoint us with your bounteous spiritual gifts.

Come, Holy Spirit, speak to us through your timeless word today. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord, amen.

So the four traditional themes of Advent, you have the Advent candle down here, our hope and peace and joy and love.

They help to guide Christians in preparation for Christmas by reflecting on the coming of Christ. The first week, hope, focused on anticipation, prophecy, the promise of the coming Savior.

[1 : 20] I think you had Andrew Fortine here during those first couple of weeks. Peace reflects on Christ as the source of reconciliation and peace for a broken world.

And then thirdly, we had joy. It centers on the gladness and the deep rejoicing of God's fulfilling promise. And then finally, the fourth week of Advent was love.

We emphasized God's profound love through his incarnation, preparing our hearts for God's, for Jesus' birth. So after Christmas, post-Christmas, we focus on extending the meaning of Jesus' birth into our daily life.

So I've entitled this message, Gifts After Christmas. In this last Sunday of the year, after the spiritual buildup to Christmas, how do we prepare ourselves to enter the new year?

So the two gifts that I want to focus on this morning will be the gift of faith, that's God's gift to his people, and the gift of works, our gifts to God our Father in appreciation for all that he has done for us.

[2 : 49] So first, a little historical perspective. We Protestants trace our roots back to Martin Luther and John Calvin.

They were protesting against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church that taught indulgences or penance or deeds or works were necessary for our salvation.

The Reformation emphasized that salvation is by faith alone, by scripture alone, through Christ alone, by grace alone, and therefore to God alone be the glory.

But the passage that we're about to study today from James can be summarized. Faith without works is dead. It's caused so much confusion and controversy over the years that some have even tried to remove it from scripture.

Apparently, Martin Luther had difficulties reconciling the truth of the Reformation with the teachings of James. The author of the book identifies himself as James.

[4 : 05] There were four men in the New Testament with the name of James. This author is thought to be the brother of Jesus, probably the next oldest right after Jesus.

In Matthew 13, verse 55, we read, Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary? And aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?

At first, James did not believe in Jesus and even challenged him and misunderstood his mission. In John 7, verse 5, we read, For even his own brothers did not believe him.

Later, James became very prominent in the church. It's thought that the book of James was written between 50 and 60 A.D.

after death and targeted to early Jewish Christians. So at this point, let's read through James 2, verses 14 through 26.

[5 : 13] I think the words will be on the screen. Beginning at verse 14. 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. But someone will say, You have faith, I have works.

Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one, you do well.

Even the demons believe and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

[6 : 25] Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. And he was called a friend of God.

You see that a person is justified by works, and not by faith alone. And in the same way, was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. So here is the question of the day.

How do we reconcile the Apostle Paul and the Apostle James? Paul, in his book to the Romans and Galatians, seems to assert the direct contrary thing, that we are justified by faith only, and not by the works of the law.

[7 : 51] In Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9, Paul says, For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith it is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.

I'm intentionally skipping verse 10, and we'll get to that later. So here's the theme. Here's the main point. It's beyond my ability to explain, so I'm quoting here from the Matthew Henry commentary. When Paul says that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law, that is from Romans 3, verse 28, he plainly speaks of another sort of work that James does, but not of another sort of faith. Paul speaks of works done in obedience to the law of Moses, and before man's embracing of the faith of the gospel.

James speaks of works done in obedience to the gospel. Both are concerned to magnify the faith of the gospel, as which alone could save us and justify us.

[9 : 06] Paul had to do with those who depend on the merit of the works of the sight of God. James has to do with those who tried up faith, but would not allow works to be used as evidence.

The justification that Paul speaks is different than what's spoken of by James. One speaks about our being justified before God.

The other speaks of faith being justified before men. Show me your faith by your works, says James. Paul speaks of justification in the sight of God.

So let's go back to the text. Verse 14, What good is it, brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?

We're referred to Matthew 7, verse 26, where we read, But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

[10 : 11] You know that familiar parable? Jesus tells about the wise and the foolish builders. If you hear and do, it's like building your house on a rock.

If you hear and don't do, it's like building your house on sand. So let's look at verses 15 and 16.

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well and be well and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

This is a concrete and easy to understand example of a good work. In Matthew 25, verse 35, Jesus says, For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. In verse 17, In the same way, Faith by itself, If it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

[11 : 23] The theme is repeated again in verse 20. Faith without deeds is useless. In verse 26, Faith without deeds is dead. What does it mean if something is dead?

If anyone has been to a funeral, you can certainly attest to the emptiness of the deceased human body. The emptiness is amplified when it's a person that you're familiar with.

All the unique characteristics that made up his or her personality are gone. Likewise, Faith devoid without works is empty.

And useless. Or to use James' choice of words, It's dead. Faith, It works alone, Will not save you, Nor will it help others to know Christ.

In verse 18, We read, Show me your faith without deeds, And I will show you my faith by what I do. The NIV study Bible Refers us back to Hebrews 11.

[12 : 34] Remember that chapter, The Heroes of Faith chapter? Where Abel offered God a better sacrifice than what Cain did. Enoch was commended as one who pleased God.

Noah built an ark to save his family. Abraham obeyed and went, Even though he did not know where he was going.

He made a new home in the promised land. Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born.

Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God. The walls of Jericho fell because the Israelites marched around them for seven days.

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets shut the mouths of lions. They quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword.

[13 : 43] Others were tortured and who became powerful and who became powerful and they routed and destroyed their foreign armies. Others were tortured and refused to be released so that they could gain a better resurrection.

Some faced jeers and flogging while others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned.

They were sawed in two and they were put to death by the sword.

I guess we have a pretty easy life. Matthew 7 from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus talks about fruit bearing trees.

In verse 16 we read, By your fruit you will recognize them. Likewise, every good fruit, every good tree bears good fruit.

But bad trees bear bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. And a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Each tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[14 : 47] Thus, by your fruit you will recognize them. Remember, James' audience is Jewish Christians. So, in verse 21, James recalls the familiar story of Abraham offering his son Isaac on the altar.

We read, Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, his faith and his actions were working together.

And his faith was made complete by what he did. In Abraham, faith came first. And then deeds. In Genesis 15 we read, Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord credited him to righteousness.

It wasn't until Genesis 22 that God tested Abraham with the sacrifice of Isaac. So, in James, verse 24, it's clear where we read, You see, a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. Then James switches from the Jewish patriarch Abraham to the Gentile Rahab the prostitute.

[16 : 11] These are extreme opposites. Abraham was a man. Rahab was a woman. Abraham was the father of Israel. Rahab was a Gentile.

Abraham lived a pretty good life. So, most Jews thought Rahab was a prostitute. James says that even Rahab was justified by her works when she received the spies and sent them out another way.

If anything, faith matured much faster for her than for Abraham. You know the familiar story from Rahab from Joshua 2.

She protected the Israelite spies. She committed an act of civil disobedience by lying to the Jericho police. In verse 25 today, we read, 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.

Rahab was mentioned among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. In verse 31, in Hebrews 11, we read, By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

[17 : 40] She did something. Verse 26, so James closes this chapter with very clear words, As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Earlier, we were a little bit hard on Martin Luther. The NIV study Bible quotes Martin Luther as saying that a man is justified or declared righteous before God by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

So today, we talked a lot about deeds. What kind of deeds are we talking about? Deeds, first of all, deeds of devotion. Prayer, Bible study, worship, sacrifice.

Abraham's action in sacrificing Isaac is an example. He placed that which was dearest to him in the world on the altar because he loved God more than he loved his own son.

Deeds of devotion are done because God is worthy of them. They are also done because we have a need for them.

[19 : 00] They keep us in touch with God and nourished by God so that we have the resources for carrying out the other two kinds of deeds. We must not allow achievements of life or even the deeds of ministry to leave us with only a pittance of time for the deeds of prayer, Bible study, and worship.

Secondly, the deeds of morality. Doing what is right to purify our speech and our thoughts, our attitudes, and our behaviors.

Rahab's action in this passage is an example of morality. It was not that she had been praying about the needs of homeless spies and decided to start a shelter ministry.

She was simply confronted with the situation and responded by doing what was morally right because she had heard about the God of Israel and had faith in him.

Helping the needy is a deed of morality incumbent on all Christians simply because it is the right thing to do.

[20 : 15] Third, deeds of ministry. But this is where we can get into trouble being driven. Every Christian needs to do the deeds of devotion and the biblical moral standards that are prescribed for all believers.

All Christians are also called to ministry. But Scripture says we have diverse spiritual gifts and therefore diverse ministries. The application of faith as the source of deeds will help us pursue appropriate deeds of ministry.

We do those deeds of ministry to which we believe. By faith we are called. We do deeds of ministry by relying on God's power rather than our own ability.

We do deeds of ministry, seeking God's glory and surrendering our desire for success and achievement. We persevere in deeds of ministry by faith, obeying God's calling.

So, conclusion. So after Christmas, what gifts are we prepared to give to Jesus, our King? What place do works have in the life of a Christian?

[21 : 32] They don't give us eternal life. They don't help us keep eternal life. They don't prove we have eternal life. Works are a reflection of our gratitude for the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus and our means of salvation from sin.

Can a person believe in Jesus and not have works? Well, probably some will have works, but those who neglect good works are missing out on all that God has for them here and now.

Remember, earlier we quoted Paul from Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9, and we read this, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

It is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast. But now listen to verse 10. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared for us in advance to do.

I would like to close with this poem from an author who is anonymous. It goes like this. I knelt to pray when day was done and prayed, Lord, bless everyone.

[23 : 04] Lift from each heart the pain and let the sick be well again. And then I woke again one day and carelessly went on my way.

The whole day long, I did not try to wipe a tear from any eye. I did not try to share the load of any brother on the road.

I did not even go to see the sick man next door to me. Yet once again, when day was done, I prayed, Lord, bless everyone.

But as I prayed, to my ear came a voice that whispered, dear, pause, hypocrite, before you pray, whom have you tried to bless today?

God's sweetest blessings always go by hands that serve him here below. Then I hid my face and cried, forgive me, Lord, for I have lied.

[24 : 21] But let me live another day and I will live the way I pray. Amen. Lord God in heaven, you've called us in Acts 1, verse 8, to be your witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and then in Appleton and out of Gamey County and to the ends of the earth.

You also tell us you will equip us. Therefore, use us in a mighty way this week wherever you have called us.
In Jesus' name, Amen.