

What is the work of the Holy Spirit? That was the question asked at a pastor's conference I attended a few years ago. It was presented by Dr. Leo Sanchez. A professor at Concordia Seminary, and somebody whose work I was familiar with and respected.

Dr. Sanchez taught us a great deal about the work of the Holy Spirit. And particularly about how the Holy Spirit works in Christians. That the Holy Spirit generally acts in us in one of two ways.

He works through thanksgiving. When you or I come to learn of the forgiveness that God has given each one of us, through, for example, receiving the Lord's Supper, it inspires thanksgiving within us. And that thanksgiving motivates us to action. God has done so much for us. So we want to do something for his kingdom in thanksgiving. That's the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit also works through regeneration. When you or I experience the Word of God through the message of our parents or a friend or a pastor or through the water of Holy Baptism, that Word is planted in our hearts. And as we grow and it is watered through more hearing of the Word, it grows and begins to bear fruit for God's Kingdom. We were dead in our sins, but now there is something alive inside us. We have been regenerated. That too is the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is all well and good. But it's also a bit esoteric. A bit impractical. It's great to know how the Holy Spirit works. Through Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Word of God. Through thanksgiving and regeneration. That's all fine and dandy.

But what is the Holy Spirit actually doing with us? We are motivated to action through thanksgiving. But what actions? We are planted with the Word of God to bear good fruit through regeneration. But what good fruit?

Well, to be honest, you can find lists of examples all over Scripture. Paul gives us the fruits of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Jesus gives us the beatitudes: contentment, a hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking. All are the work of the Spirit.

Scripture is packed full of examples. But they really boil down to two categories. Faith that helps you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And good works that help you love your neighbor as yourself. The Holy Spirit is constantly making us more obedient to the two tables of the Law.

And that's what Dr. Sanchez would eventually point out. The Holy Spirit always works to make you right with God. And the Holy Spirit always works to help you love your neighbor. If you are listening to a pastor, or reading an author, or discussing theology with a friend and he is telling you to do something that does not accomplish those two purposes, then it ain't the work of the Holy Spirit. And if it's not the work of the Holy Spirit, then it's probably the work of an unholy spirit.

Which brings us to the Epistle lesson for today. Because this is all really at the core of what James is telling us here. This is not a simple passage to understand. Theologians have been hashing over it for centuries. It's been misunderstood and misapplied plenty of times.

Because it can sound an awful lot like James is telling us that faith doesn't matter. That faith alone is useless. That you must have good works to be a Christian.

And as Lutherans, that makes us uncomfortable. Because our confession was written on the foundation of Romans chapter 3: *"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."* And on Galatians chapter 2: *"Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."* And on Ephesians chapter 2: *"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, at first glance, it sounds like there's a contradiction here. Paul is saying we are saved by faith, apart from works. And James is saying we are saved by a combination of faith and works. Which is it?

Well... it's both. Because that's not what they're really saying. What Paul and James are both saying is that we are saved by the work of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit produces faith that saves us. That makes us right with God. And the Holy Spirit produces good works that help others. That help us love our neighbor.

Good works don't save you. And James would completely agree with that. But the Holy Spirit isn't just interested in our salvation. The Holy Spirit is also interested in showing God's love to others. And that's why he gives us both faith and good works.

Which is why James is so horrified by the thought of a person saying, "I have faith. Good works don't matter to me." Because that's not something the Holy Spirit would ever say. Which suggests at least the possibility that that's not a person who has the Holy Spirit. Which means that's not a person who actually has faith, despite what they claim.

How do I know this? I know this first because of the words of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was filled with the Holy Spirit. He spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And when Isaiah looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, he didn't just see the coming of a great and powerful man. He saw the coming of a man filled with the Holy Spirit. And he knew what that Spirit looks like in action.

It looks like the eyes of the blind being opened. It looks like that ears of the deaf being unstopped. It looks like a paralyzed man leaping for joy. It looks like the tongue of the mute speaking for the first time. It looks like paradise on earth.

Why? Because that is what humanity needs. When the love of God is poured out in its fullness, everything wrong with the world becomes right. When the Spirit of God takes action, people find help and salvation.

And we see that at work when that prophecy is fulfilled. When Jesus Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, walks the earth. And paradise follows in his wake. The blind see. The deaf hear. The paralyzed walk. And the mute speak.

It's not actually the point of Jesus' ministry. He begs his followers to tell no one about it. But he keeps doing it anyway. Because he must. Because he is filled with the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit must help people. The Holy Spirit must work to bring faith. And the Holy Spirit must work to show compassion. That's just what He does. And so Jesus' ministry is a ministry of faith and of compassion.

That's what James is talking about. If Jesus' life was one of faith and good works, then a Christian's life is one of faith and good works. Because we both work by the power of the same Spirit.

But this brings up an important question. Does this mean that if we fail to help our neighbor that we are without the Holy Spirit? That we are without faith? That we are without salvation? No. Of course not.

But it does mean that, in that moment of failure, we've ignored the Holy Spirit. That when we saw a person in need and the voice of the Spirit inside us said, "Help them," we said, "No. I won't. I don't want to. You can't make me. Go away."

Thanks be to God, the Spirit doesn't just leave that easily. As we heard last week, we have a God who is near to us. Who stays near to us. Who steps into our world to wash us clean and give us holy food. Who does not leave us or forsake us. Even when we stray. Even when we turn him away.

But silencing the Spirit's voice does mean that we have strayed and turned God away. It does mean that we have sinned. We have fallen short of the glory of God.

We have broken one of his two greatest commandments. Because we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. And so, in the process, have also broken the greatest command to love the Lord our God. We have broken one law, and so have also broken the entire Law.

We have sinned. We need to confess that sin. We need to repent. And we need to start again. Knowing full well that we will sin again. And confess that sin again. And repent again. And start again. Again and again and again.

Because that's what life in the Spirit is. Dr. Sanchez actually described it like this: The Christian life is described by St Paul as a race. With a starting line and finish line. But the race isn't a straight line. With the start over here and end over there.

It's more like a Nascar race. Driving in circles. Over and over again. Making progress and then falling back. Making progress and falling back.

And yet, there is still a finish line to all of it. There is still a crown of glory awaiting those who complete the race. It may feel like driving in circles, but there's an end to all of it. And when the checkered flag falls, when the race is over, paradise will be waiting for you. Amen.