

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

We're in the 500th anniversary year of the Reformation. And no doubt there will be more Reformation connections as we go through this year. But we have one in our text today. We're going to talk a bit today about good works.

Now remember, we entered into this Sermon on the Mount last Sunday with Jesus' recitation of the Beatitudes: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*"; and again, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 5:3, 10). And the point was made that these refer to Jesus in the first instance, and then to His disciples in the second instance, as we repent and walk humbly with our God. As we trust in Christ, we are living under the reign of Christ our King.

That's just what the Reformation was about: restoring the Biblical message that the reign of Christ does not come through our many strivings; salvation is the gift of God through faith. You know the passages: The "*righteousness of God [comes] through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith*" (Rom. 3:22-25). And again, "*we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law*" (Rom. 3:28).

But then come the questions: what of our good works? Are they necessary to be saved? Is there any merit whatsoever from them? Do good works preserve us in the faith? Can we even talk about good works coming from sinners? Or, maybe they're even harmful to the Christian. These are some of the questions that roiled the Lutheran Church after Luther's death. The answers had already been confessed at Augsburg in 1530. For example, "*Our teachers are falsely accused of forbidding good works*" (AC, Article XX:1); "*we teach that it is necessary to do good works ... because it is God's will*" (AC, Article XX:27); and "*[our teachers] teach that our works cannot reconcile God to us or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification. We obtain reconciliation only by faith*" (AC, Article XX:9).

Nevertheless, the questions arose after Luther's death, and the Lutherans responded further to these questions in the Formula of Concord. St. Paul anticipates the questions, for just after he proclaims "*one is justified by faith apart from works of the law,*" he asks, "*Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?*" And he answers emphatically: "*By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law*" (Rom. 3:31).

These questions concern Jesus also in our Gospel today as He is addressing His disciples—believers in Him. And, like Paul, Jesus is emphatic when He says,

“You are the salt of the earth.” He doesn’t say, *“That’s how my disciples ought to be,”* but *“that’s who my disciples are: the salt of the earth.”*

Now when you hear that phrase applied to someone, what do you think? That person is good, honest, dependable? They’re “real”? That is, they don’t put on airs, acting like they’re better than you? They’re the ones who live the kind of lives that are emulated by others, who are role models to others, who add value to the lives of others?

That is who Christian disciples are called to be—good, honest, dependable, humble servants. Thus, the Lord does not take us out of the world, but keeps us in the world for the sake of the world, that we might season the world as salt seasons food and makes it palatable. Similarly, when Christians are in the world, being salt in the world, we make the world more palatable.

And isn’t that true? Consider the world today as the Christian influence has been waning. Hasn’t it become less hospitable, less respectful, less peaceful, less loving? Salty Christians season the world around them. And the unsalty? Then the world suffers, for when Jesus says, *“if the salt has become useless,”* He’s not really asking how the salt can become salty again—a rather poor translation. Rather, He’s asking, *“if my disciples are not out in the world being salt, how will it, that is, how will the world, be seasoned?”* Salty Christians have work to do in the world—good works are necessary!

Similarly, Jesus says emphatically: *“You are the light of the world.”* Of course, yours is reflected glory—for Christ is the source; He is the bright morning star; He is the light shining in the darkness; He is the true light that has come into the world; He is the light that lightens the Gentiles and the glory of His people Israel. But Jesus says, *“Let your light shine. Don’t hide it, but let it shine. Let others see the good works—the necessary good works—that proceed from your faith, that the Father may be glorified.”*

So we have some answers today to the questions regarding works. Certainly good works are necessary; not only does Jesus say that we can do them, He also commands them to be done. Moreover, good works are done for the sake of the world and to give glory to the Father.

But we hear further from Jesus, and we hear how St. Paul was just echoing Jesus when he talked about the ongoing influence of the law. Jesus here in our Gospel tells us, He *“did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.”* Jesus is emphatic again, saying, *“truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will [ever] pass from the Law.”* The law has an ongoing relevance in the world—*“for Scripture cannot be broken,”* (John 10:35) and faith does not nullify that.

For sin still clings to us. We cannot be rid of it or its corrupting influence except by passing through death. So, the law still applies, and indeed, the law still

has power—the power to curb our basest lusts to sin. It still has the power to accuse our guilty consciences, for *“if it [were not] for the law, [we] would not have known sin”* (Rom. 7:7). And, the law is still *“the power of sin”* (1 Cor. 15:56).

The law also has the power to teach the new self, the self born of water and the Spirit, the new self that desires to follow the Lord’s precepts; it has the power to teach the new self godliness. The law provides a *“training in righteousness”* (2 Tim. 3:16), in the kinds of works that God calls good.

On the other hand, for us Christians, the law has lost its power to condemn, for Christ came, He said, *“to fulfill [the Law and the Prophets].”* And He has fulfilled them. From the law of circumcision at 8 days old to His presentation at the temple at 40 days, Jesus was born under the law, that by His fulfillment of the law, He might redeem us who are under the law. Even at His baptism, you’ll recall—unnecessary for Him — Jesus fulfilled “all righteousness” for us. And in Jesus taking our place on the cross, though it may seem folly, God did for us what we could not accomplish for ourselves by the law. *“By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us”* (Rom. 8:3-4). In Christ crucified, God is vindicated—He is found to be both just and the one who justifies (Rom. 3:26)—and so are we vindicated: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 8:1).

This is our salvation, and none of it is by our fulfilling of the law; none of it is by our good works. Therefore, there are the answers to those final questions on good works: good works, though necessary because God commands them and necessary to serve our neighbor and to give praise and honor to the Father, are not necessary to effect or assist in our salvation. Salvation is of God alone. And good works are harmful only when we want to take credit for them and start to apply them to our salvation.

So then, this is the life you have been called to as Jesus’ disciples: trusting in Him and loving one another. For you have been set apart as Christians—consecrated in the waters of your baptisms. Therefore, live boldly as Christians, and not out of fear or a seeking after a righteousness that you can never achieve, but out of the blessedness of faith. You ARE the salt of the world, and the light, too. Be who you are. Fulfill your vocations: as child, parent, grandparent, husband, wife, student, worker, employer, citizen, leader. Repent of your failures; be forgiven, rejoicing in Him who both fulfilled the Law for you and shed His blood to free you from its condemnation. Eat His body and drink His blood, that you may be strengthened in your faith to *“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to the Father who is in heaven.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.