

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 1/13/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, he wrote an introduction to each book. These introductions were a sort of grading of each book. He was very big on Romans and the Gospel of John. But Luther didn't like the Letter of James. In fact, he called it a "book of straw." Luther felt that the book was actually dangerous for Christians because of the line that "faith without works is dead." His fear was that Christians would read this and become confused about salvation by faith alone.

There are many Christians today who believe and are taught that our relationship with GOD is based on what we do. They believe that eternal life with GOD is achieved by earning GOD'S favor through doing good works. I recall a lady telling me that her husband didn't believe in GOD, but that he was a really good person, as though to say that this was all that was necessary. In several of Paul's letters, though, he makes it clear that it is faith alone that saves us. Therefore, our actions, our good works, are our response to what GOD has done for us, particularly in JESUS CHRIST.

In one sense, Luther was absolutely right. Because it is faith that saves us, that solidifies our relationship with GOD, the idea that we have to earn GOD'S love was not what the Bible taught. Granted, James was trying to show, not that it is works that saves, but that works are the outward sign of a faith that seeks to follow the example of CHRIST. James was saying that if you really believe, it will be easy to tell by looking at how you live your life, at what you do to serve others. Still, Luther was afraid that people would read James and again, come to think that it is our actions alone that save, and not faith alone. So, if Luther could have, he would have ripped the Letter of James out of the Bible and thrown it away.

Later in life, however, Luther changed his position on James. He found himself getting into some pretty harsh arguments with people who claimed that because they believed, they didn't have to care about helping people or working to bring people to faith. In one sense, these folks were very much like the Jews who claimed that simply by virtue of being descended from Abraham, their relationship with GOD was solid. Luther discovered that the Letter of James was pretty helpful when talking with these people. Luther came to recognize that in some cases, it's important to emphasize that we're made right with GOD apart from our actions. But in other situations, it's helpful to be able to say that faith without acts of service based on that faith is dead.

For us, it is important to do all that we can to make sure our faith is solid and growing. Worship, Bible study, and faith conversations with other believers are all helpful for doing this. But our actions based on our faith are also valuable. First, they witness to our faith—the outward sign that what we believe shows through what we do. Second, our actions of service and witness help our faith to grow as we increase our commitment to CHRIST in the process of acting on HIS behalf in kindness and generosity to others.

In CHRIST'S love,  
Pastor Jeffrey