

Weekly Message from Pastor Pook for February 26, 2021

Good morning, everyone. It is Friday, the 26th of February. We are in our first week of Lent, officially. And Lent is often a time where we think about giving something up, by giving up chocolate, or TV, or sweets, or something that we'd give up for Lent. And the idea is, in some people's minds, that we are doing a good thing. They were demonstrating that we can sacrifice for the Lord, maybe even consider it a good work, something that we do for the Lord. But I think I want to define what is a good work, because we are indeed called to do good works. And giving something up for Lent can be a very good thing, if it is properly understood.

So to give something up for Lent is not to show how faithful we are to God, but to discipline ourselves, to learn to submit ourselves in some small way to the will of our Father, Jesus Christ, and to recognize how often we actually think about our own well-being rather than God's will for our lives. It's amazing if you decide to give up chocolate, how much your mind turns to the chocolate bar, and how very quickly you see chocolate everywhere, and how tempting it is to go and have some. And what that should do, and what it supposed to do, is to remind us that without Christ, without His grace and mercy in our lives, we are subject to our sinful nature. And our sinful nature rules over us as a compulsion that we cannot control, because it is so wrapped into our DNA. But for the sake of Jesus Christ and through His justification of us in our baptisms that He gave to us on the cross, we can and do good works for the Lord, properly understood.

And so there's a writing here from the Augsburg Confession. Now, again, the Augsburg Confession is that one document that was written for the emperor of the Holy Roman empire, Charles V. And it was written not by a pastor, it was written by a layman, Philip Melanchthon. He was not ordained. He was a professor. He was a college professor and he was a learned man, but he was not a pastor. He was a layman. And he wrote the document, not for pastors to subscribe to, but for layman to subscribe to. The people that presented the Augsburg Confession before their emperor were not pastors and theologians, they were mayors and electors and city council members, and other people of political leadership in the Holy Roman Empire, from Germany, from the area where Luther was at. They were not theologians. And this document was written as a layman's document, as a document for them to be able to express their faith, clearly.

So this section that we're reading is from the Augsburg Confession and it's article 20 and the paragraphs are 27 through 40, if you want to look it up in the Book of Concord, but we're going to read about good works and where they sit with everything. "We teach that it is necessary to do good works. This does not mean that we merit grace by doing good works, but they are necessary, and we should do them, because it is God's will." So for no other reason than the fact that God told us to do good works, we are called to do good works, regardless of whether they do us any good or not. Just because God said, "These are the things you should do." All right, you're my God. I believe you saved me. Therefore, I will do them.

"It is only by faith and nothing else that forgiveness of sins is apprehended," or received. "The Holy Spirit is received through faith, hearts are renewed and given new affections, and then they are able to bring forth good works." Ambrose, who was one of the church fathers, an early church writer first and second century AD. Ambrose says, "Faith is the mother of a good will and doing what is right. Without the Holy Spirit, people are full of ungodly desires. They're too weak to do works that are good in God's sight. Besides, they are in the power of the devil, who pushes human beings into various sins, ungodly opinions and open crimes. We see this in the philosophers who, although they tried to live an honest life could not succeed, but were defiled with many open crimes. Such is human weakness, without faith and without the Holy Spirit, when governed only by human strength."

So again, what we're saying is without the Holy Spirit, we can do nothing but evil. And our hearts are inclined towards evil thoughts, murder and adultery, as the Scripture says. But with the power of the Holy Spirit, through our baptisms, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because of His death on the cross, we are then able to do what is pleasing to God, because we have the Spirit given to us.

"Therefore, it is easy to see that this doctrine is not to be accused of banning good works. Instead, it is to be commended all the more, because it shows how we are enabled to do good works. For without faith, human nature cannot in any way, do the works of the first or second commandment." You should have no other gods and you should not misuse the name of the Lord, which also means calling upon Him in time of trouble. So if you don't believe in God, if you don't have faith, you cannot call upon the name of the Lord. You just can't. You cannot have Him as a God if you do not have faith in that God. Therefore, anything that you do outside of Christ is not a good work.

And again, the Augsburg Confession. "Without faith, human nature does not call upon God, nor expect anything from Him, nor bear the cross. Instead, human nature seeks and trusts in human help. So when there is no faith and trust in God, all kinds of lusts and human intentions rule in the heart. This is why Christ says, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." That's John 15, verse 5. "That is why the church sings, "Lacking your divine favor. There is nothing in man. Nothing in him is harmless.""

It's pretty judging and demoralizing if you think about it only as, "There's nothing good I can do. Even the good that I tried to do, is not good if it is done for my own reasons and for my own purposes." But everything that I do, because I have faith in Christ, everything that I do, including changing a diaper, digging a ditch, changing a flat tire, going to work on a daily basis, anything else that we do. All of that are considered good works because we do them through the power of the Holy Spirit and because we have faith in Christ. We thank Him for the gift that He has given to us of our hands and our mind and our intellect and our feet, so that we can do the labor that He has given to us. We thank Him for the family that is given to us, so we raise our children and we care for them and we keep them in Your loving care and we teach them and train them. We thank God for the neighborhood, the world that we live in, that He has created, that He has given us to live in so that we might share His love with those around us. So because God has done, therefore we reach out.

And so it's always motivated by the fact that Christ has done all of this for us. And because He lives within us, then we do good things and give Him all the glory. So in the past, the Lutheran church has often been called a church that does not do good works, that we believe in cheap grace, that we're saved by grace alone and not by works, lest any man should boast. Well, okay, so we don't need to do anything? Good. No, no. That's not our attitude. We are saved by grace through faith and not by works. And we do not boast about that, because we only boast in the Lord. But because we are saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, therefore we can do great things to thank God and praise him for all of His wonderful gifts that He has given to us. So let us never tire of doing good works to serve our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name, Amen.