

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 5-6, 2009
James 2:1-17

“Improper Distinctions”

Some years ago, a major food products company tried to market an instant cake mix that turned out to be a big flop. The instructions on the mix said all you had to do was add water and bake. The company couldn't understand why it didn't sell – until their research discovered that the buying public felt uneasy about a mix that required only water. Apparently people thought it was too easy. So the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for adding an egg to the mix in addition to the water. The idea worked and sales jumped dramatically (from sermonillustrations.com). Perhaps this real-life example can help us understand the continuing challenge over faith and works in the life of Christ's people. Despite the preaching and teaching that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone which comes to us through Scripture alone, many people continue to believe that our good conduct will get us into heaven. Is salvation by grace through faith too easy, like that cake mix? The question asked in that Second (Epistle) Reading from James seems borderline heresy: **“Can faith save you?”** (James 2:14). For Lutherans especially, who pride ourselves on making proper distinctions Law and Gospel, faith and works, sin and grace, this seems very troubling. And so on this Labor Day weekend, the message for today is entitled “Improper Distinctions.” May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

James points out a real-life improper distinction that could just as easily be made today as it was in his day. If a person comes into our worship service who is nicely dressed and looking good, we will probably welcome that person. But if another person comes among us whose clothes are worn and tattered, who is unclean and not smelling very good, we will probably not be as welcoming of that person. This may not always hold true, but often it does. And so the words of James convict us: **“... have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?... if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it”** (James 2:4, 9-10). The point James is making is clear: if we have faith but that faith does not manifest itself in Christ-like living, then, “Houston, we've got a problem.” The words of the Lord to the prophet Samuel speak to these improper distinctions that we make: **“... the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart”** (1 Samuel 16:7).

It almost seems like Jesus himself is making improper distinctions between people in today's Gospel lesson (Mark 7:24-37). A Gentile woman, not part of Israel, approaches Jesus, not for herself but for her daughter. She and her people were referred to as “mongrels” by the Israelites – racially impure and inferior. She wants Jesus to cast out the demon from her daughter. And Jesus' response? It seems downright rude and insulting: **“Let the children [the people of Israel, God's chosen children] be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs [the Gentiles, those outside Israel]”** (Mark 7:27). It is true that Jesus' first mission was to reach out to God's chosen people, the lost sheep of the house of Israel (see Matt. 10:5-6). But Jesus' mission didn't end there; it expanded to include all people. This anonymous woman could easily have walked away in a huff, offended by Jesus' remark. But like any good mother, she won't let her daughter's needs be denied. She won't take no for an answer. She affirms what Jesus said and acknowledges this, but in faithful persistence she throws it back to Jesus: **“Sir,**

even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). Recognizing her faith in his power to help, Jesus heals the woman's daughter.

James is sometimes wrongly accused of making an improper distinction between salvation by faith and salvation by works: **"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?"** (James 2:14). Even Luther himself, it seems, did not fully grasp what James was saying as he referred to James as "an epistle of straw." "For James there is no question that true faith 'saves,' but only true faith, not a fruitless thing that one may call faith. To James saving faith means exactly what it does to Paul, when Paul declares that we are justified by faith without law-works: a true and living trust in the Savior Jesus Christ... Paul does not have in mind one kind of faith when he says that faith without works saves, while James has in mind another kind of a faith when he says that without works faith does not save. Both mean identically the same kind of a faith..." (*The Interpretation of James – Lenski, pp. 586-587*). My friends, this is not either/or, but both/and. An improper distinction would be either faith or works. "Paul deals with law-works... James deals with Gospel-works... Paul roots out what destroys and excludes faith; James stimulates sluggish faith. The two are in perfect agreement" (*Lenski, p. 587*). James closes today's Second (Epistle) Lesson with these words: **"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead"** (James 2:17). Jesus tells us: **"... the tree is known by its fruit"** (Matt. 12:33). Saving faith in Jesus and what he has done in offering his life as payment for our sins upon the cross will make itself known in good works done in Jesus' name. As the apple tree produces fruit because it cannot do otherwise, so the believer in Jesus will produce the fruit of good works because he or she cannot do otherwise. God's great love for us in Jesus will make itself known in good works in our lives. And so our improper distinctions give way to proper ones that give praise to God and serve as a blessing to others. May God help us to do this for Jesus' sake. Amen.