

Grace and mercy be multiplied to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

SERMON THEME: "Love That Shows!"

SERMON TEXT: James 2:14-17, 26 (Read first)

Dear People of God,

Picture this, if you will: People praying, assembled together in a house of worship. All heads are bowed, and everyone is quiet except for the voice of one praying aloud. The prayer sounds sincere; there seems to be great concern for people who are hungry and lack clothing and shelter. Some are local people, and they are even named. "Dear Lord, we earnestly petition You to provide for these poor, needy souls! Give them bread to strengthen their bodies, clothing to keep them warm, and a roof over their heads. You are a God who can do all things; show them Your divine favor for Jesus' sake! Let them, Lord, be filled and warm, and safe from the storms..." Is there anything wrong with this prayer? Is a request like this in accord with God's will? Yes, it's a good and proper prayer.

Now, let's watch the people. Prayer time is over, and the benediction is spoken. A hymn is sung, and the worship hour is concluded. The people rise and greet one another and begin to leave God's house. God enables us to see everyone as they go their way. Several families go home. Several people leave town right away. One family with children goes to a campground. A few gather at a park for games. We see several couples go to a restaurant. Two young men go to a shop to work on a sports car they're getting ready to race. Fishing and a workout at an exercise gym are the aim of a couple more. Of those who went home, some are eating, some napping, some working on hobbies, and a few are watching T.V. or DVD's. One then goes to visit friends, and another makes a hospital visit.

We marvel as we watch, because only hours earlier, all had prayed together, "Lord, provide for those poor, needy souls." Yet, the hungry remained hungry, though those who prayed had, for the most part, had something to eat following worship! The ill-clad had nothing more to wear than when the day began, and they were still exposed to the elements. The hours pass, the day

ends and the needy are still in need. By now the worshipers have eaten again. Monday comes, individuals and families are caught up in work and school, chores at home, and leisure-time activities. At dinner tables thanks is given for food, but there is no mention of those who are hungry. Already, one day after all of God's people prayed together for their needy neighbors to be filled and warmed, they seem to have been forgotten!

The week progresses: Tuesday, the same thing. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, the same. Not another prayer is spoken, not a finger lifted to provide for the needs of those who had nothing. We think, "Ah, Saturday; most will have a day off and now they will go to the needy!" Again, we watch closely. But instead of going to a grocery store or the freezer, or to a clothing store or the closet, we are astounded to witness another kind of preparation. Some cars and campers are being loaded alright. Food and clothing are being assembled. Lo, and behold, the worst of our fears are confirmed! Several of the people who prayed for the needy, people redeemed by the blood of Jesus, members of the royal priesthood, are leaving town... Others we see shopping, cleaning house, sitting at the computer, you name it. What we don't see is anyone going to the poor as the outstretched hand of God! Hungry people are still hungry...

When the people were praying for God to help the poor, they missed the essential point of their own prayer! To pray, "Lord, feed the poor", one is really saying, "Lord, show me the poor; help me to help them!" The fact is, we are part of the answer to our own prayers! You and I are God's outstretched hand of mercy! God doesn't reach down from heaven and hand out food or provide clothing! He calls upon, and enables US to do that! Thirty-five times in just the book of Proverbs the poor are mentioned! "Happy is the man who is kind to the poor" (14:21). "He who has a bountiful eye will be blessed for he shares his bread with the poor" (22:9). "He who gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse" (28:27). And so on. Clearly, our Lord loves the poor just as much as anyone else! And He wants them to have the basic necessities of life! So He provides for them by sending US to them!

We who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ are chosen by the heavenly Father to go to dear souls in need, both physical

and spiritual, and share with them what we have—including food, clothing and shelter, AND the joy of salvation by the grace of God! Providing for a needy person's physical needs is often a door-opener to providing for their spiritual well-being as well, for witnessing to the love of Jesus for all people! Only a hypocrite would claim to love Jesus and refuse to give the needy what he needs to live!

James' inspired words are telling us that if we don't provide for a "brother or sister (who) is ill-clad and in lack of daily food," we have a dead faith! That is to say our faith will not save us! Listen again to the question he poses: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?" This is a rhetorical question, of course, and the answer is "No, it cannot". He concludes, as we heard, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (v. 17). Statistically, the majority of Americans say, "Oh, yes, I believe in God!" But what are they really saying? Does that mean they have put their trust completely in Jesus to atone for their sins, OR, does it mean they simply believe there is a God? Do they worship the one, true God regularly, serve Him, tithe of their incomes, witness to His saving grace, study the Bible and pray from the heart? Faith by itself, without a loving, personal relationship with Jesus, without obedience to the heavenly Father, without loving one's neighbor, is dead, not a saving faith, futile, empty, even vain.

Proof: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and IF I HAVE ALL FAITH, so as to remove mountains, *but have not love*, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, *but have not love*, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Then this summary, also by Paul, "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (v. 13). Following our text James goes on to connect faith to good works. And good works means loving people enough to do something good for them. "Faith is completed by works", he says. We can say it this way: "Faith is shown to be alive by works of love." Love comes first. "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Because Jesus died for our sins, we love Him! And because we are justified--that means declared innocent of sin—by the grace of God for the sake of Jesus' atoning sacrifice, we trust in Him! This is faith! So the

faith we have in Jesus is rooted in love! Faith is inseparably connected with love! Good works proceed from love, believing this is God's will. One more time, verse 26, James concludes, "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead." This means the love is missing! In context, if one is not providing for the ill-clad and the hungry, or simply for anyone with legitimate need, his faith is dead. It is not a living faith. It is not a saving faith. Love for the poor is lacking!

Love is made manifest in works. But faith cannot be seen. Faith makes its presence known by heart-felt repentance and trust in God, followed by good works, by acts of love. Jesus Himself pointed out in language a child can understand, a tree is known by the fruit it bears (Matthew 7:16-20). Just agreeing there is a God, just an intellectual acceptance of the Gospel, just going through the motions of worship, isn't enough to save anyone's soul. The truth of Scripture is that only a living faith saves, only a belief in God that responds to His love with loving deeds. In chapter 1 we find, "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." If anyone says he believes in Jesus Christ this morning, but refuses to do what the Spirit teaches here, he is deceiving himself. Scripture repeatedly tells us to provide for our neighbor—"a brother or sister" as we see here—because this is the way of love. This is God's way of answering our prayers for the poor! God shows His love for the needy and the unsaved through us!

Even many unbelievers provide for the basic needs of the poor, as we often see in the media and in our community. How much more should we, who bear the name of Christ, who were joined with Him in Holy Baptism, strive to be at the forefront of the fight against poverty?! To simply say to the needy, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body," OR to pray for them without following the prayer with action, is not the Christ-like way. This is not love, not the kind of faith that saves the soul. Good works don't save the soul either, but they do show our faith is *alive* and that's the faith that saves!

What, then can we do to please our dear Lord? First, love Him and all people! Secondly, believe in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior! Surrender your lives to Him in humble and willing ser-

vice! By all means pray for the needy, but follow the prayer with meaningful action! We can all be observant, keeping an eye out for people in need, and on an individual basis give them what they need. If you know of a person or family who is struggling to meet daily needs, share what you have; go to the grocery store and buy them a couple sacks of groceries. If their clothing is ragged, give them new clothing. Corporately, we can get organized to the point we can help by paying utility and rent payments—we did this in a big way at Grace Lutheran in Canada, and the congregation was richly blessed! Contribute to local, reputable food banks. We can send contributions to LCMS World Relief to help in the wake of hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding, fires, and other occurrences which leave brothers and sisters in need.

And while we're helping the poor, keep in mind the greatest need of all, the salvation of their souls! In providing help for the body, we are also witnessing to the love of our God; we are showing how Jesus has first loved us!

Remember, when we pray for someone who needs food, we are actually asking God to send us to provide. We who confess Christ are His hand of mercy! We are the answer to our own prayers for the needy to be warmed and filled! Our love for our gracious Lord and for each other should be visible, shown forth by good works! There cannot be saving faith without love, nor true love for God without faith. And genuine love and an abiding faith cannot be contained! The soul redeemed by the blood of Christ is compelled to act! Every true child of God will have a living faith and a "Love That Shows!"

Today, this morning, we who are the temple of the Holy Spirit have a mission before us. We who have a living faith can be someone's answer to prayer, someone's help in time of need. Be like Jesus. He loved the poor and the lame, the outcast and even His enemies. He simply wants us to do the same! Those among us who do have a living faith, and have been caring for the poor know the blessings that follow, and one day soon you will hear those most blessed words, "Well done good and faithful servant; ...enter into the joy of Your Master" (Matthew 25:21)!

In Jesus' name, Amen.

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The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will keep your hearts and minds through a living faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Donald P. Tonack