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Scriptures: James 5:13-20, 2:17
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-20
Psalm 19: 7-14
Mark 9: 38-50

When I first signed up for a senior sermon, I knew that I would use the recommended texts for the week trusting that they would speak to me and I would just inherently know what direction to go with the message. Then I read the assigned scriptures for the first time and my plan became less clear. Collectively, the scriptures assigned for this week are depressing and difficult to interpret. Jesus' call in the gospel of Mark to cut off or otherwise get rid of any body parts that causes us to sin have to be dealt with delicately. In modern times few interpret the passage literally, and yet such strong language can't simply be ignored. Similarly, the ELCA assigned a passage in James has often been avoided by Lutherans in modern times because it seems to claim that works are indeed an important element in the salvation of one's soul. As a traditionally-raised Lutheran, these passages caught me somewhat off guard. While I had heard the gospel verse before, it had never occurred to me that Jesus is emphasizing the importance of works in the Mark text until it was paired with the James passage.

Jesus' unpleasant explanation in Mark to the disciples' question must be viewed with that question in mind. John says to Jesus, "We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." This prompts Jesus' response that not only was the man right in his actions but that "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me." He then goes on to elaborate on various types of sins and the importance of doing everything one can to

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avoid them. While it is possible to read this text and picture a God who is watching from above with a Santa Clause type list carefully keeping track of who has been naughty and who has been nice with consequences that reach far beyond a lump of coal, I believe a better interpretation is to hear the promise of an easier path to faith in Jesus words. The action of driving out demons in Jesus name is not good because of the act itself but because it means that person is strengthening their faith, and perhaps the faith of those who witness it. Jesus' further lecture on the removal of things that cause you to sin can be interpreted to show the incredible eternal difference between heaven and hell.

Additionally, Jesus directly references only body parts but on a more abstract level, this could refer to all of the things in our lives that cause us to sin and move us away from faith. Many of these things we actually can separate ourselves from whether it is bad social influences or a simple source of temptation. Jesus does not say that God will not allow us into his kingdom due to sin, but implies that a life full of sin makes a life full of faith incredibly difficult. Sin is not something to be avoided out of a fear of punishment, but because it draws us away from the truth and grace of God

Because Jesus' call in Mark when literally interpreted goes beyond what we are realistically willing to do, as you can all see I have not engaged in any self mutilation despite the fact that I sin, and also goes beyond what God truly wants for us. We must look to other texts to find ways to please God. One place that promises answers to these difficult questions is the book of James.

At first, James seems to point towards a theology of salvation through actions. His example of Abraham being willing to sacrifice Isaac so that he could be put right with

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God clearly demonstrates the importance of moving beyond a simple lip service faith. The idea that people can save themselves through pious actions however, conflicts with other Bible passages, not to mention Lutheran dogma, which claims that we are all sinners and that salvation can come only through the grace of God.

I am not a biblical scholar and I certainly can't read the ancient languages in which it was written, so I don't know for sure what the right answers are. I do notice however, that each Biblical passage must be interpreted carefully to ascertain its true meaning. The section in James that at first seems to declare the importance of doing good works to please God may instead point to the importance of good works to a person's faith. This raises the inevitable dilemma of which causes which. Must a person first have faith in order to do good works that are pleasing to God, or are a foundation of good works necessary to build faith? In the long run however, this question of which comes first becomes irrelevant and it becomes clear that the two form a symbiotic relationship in that they are mutually beneficial.

For every passage in James that seems to point to salvation by works, there seems to be an even more unambiguous passage declaring that God's grace is what is truly important. While the James reading starts out by giving a list of actions that correspond to various situations a person may be in, it quickly moves on to the importance of God's grace to forgiveness culminating with the verse, a "prayer made in faith will heal the sick, the lord will restore them to health and the sins they have committed will be forgiven."

When the book of James is taken as a whole, the message of salvation by works seems to be replaced by a message about human's need to perform actions that keep their

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faith strong not for God, but for themselves. This is most clear in James 2:17 which states that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” It is similar to doing the homework for a class you are not taking for credit. The actions we take and homework we do is not an effort to please the professor, but instead a conscious choice made to enhance our abilities or quality of life in some way. Good words come out of our faith and the security that faith provides, just as even audited classes go better when we are secure in our knowledge of the material. Living a life that is filled with faithful works is important not because without such a life we will not find salvation, but because it allows us live better, more fulfilling lives and helps us to find a strong and consistent faith.