

I think our Scripture readings for this Sunday help us understand the proper relationship between faith and works. In our second reading from Romans, St. Paul is clear about justification by faith: "...there is no distinction; all have sinned and are deprived by the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus...For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

In the first part of our Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus seems to be saying the same thing: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?' Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.'" It seems that doing works in Jesus' name is no guarantee that we will enter into heaven.

How can this be? If we look at history, we can see that, sadly, Jesus' words are borne out. How many people have used violence, or gone to war, in the name of Jesus? How many people have "prophesied" against others, simply because they are different, in the name of Jesus? Or how many convinced themselves that they were driving out "demons" or doing "mighty deeds" by trying to eliminate whole groups of people from the face of the earth? We have seen that things can be done in the name of Jesus that have nothing to do with God's will.

But even though we may not be justified by works, and that doing works does not guarantee us entrance into heaven, works are important. Listen to Jesus in the second part of our Gospel reading: "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been built solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined."

We *are* called to *act* on the words of Jesus, not just listen to them. But in acting, we must be careful to seek to do *God's* will, and not our own. If we act without listening to Jesus, we are merely listening to ourselves, and that is surely a shaky foundation on which to stand! When we listen just to ourselves, and follow our own will, we can easily be led astray. We can focus on what is not important, and if the things which we relied on are somehow gone, then we feel lost and we lose hope. If we listen without acting, then our faith has no power. It has been said: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing" (attributed to Edmund Burke).

The more we seek to discern God's will, and then act on it, the stronger we will be in our faith, and the easier it will be to discern God's will for us. We may not be justified by works, but our works are meant to be an expression of our faith by which we are justified. As the letter of St. James says, "So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:17). We need to build our lives on the solid foundation of God's love and grace and will. God will give us what we need to do what He calls us to do.

May God continue to bless us all. May we listen to Jesus and do God's will.

In Christ,

Fr. Phil, CP