

“Faith or / and works?” Matthew 22:34-40

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today, as we meditate upon our Gospel reading, we will focus on – **the relationships between faith and works**. Or we could say – on relationships between what we believe and how we live.

People of faith... have you heard this phrase? You, people of faith! It is often used referring to Christians. People of faith... What do you think about this phrase? I think it is really misleading. It kind of divides humanity in people of faith and people of ... I am not sure how the rest would be called.

People of works? Or people of reason? Or people without faith? I don't know. The point I want to make is this – we all, every single human being is a person of faith. Yes, all people are people of faith. What do I mean by this?

See, we all assume, or we could say, we all believe that there are some foundational things that are true. But those are not things that we can somehow check or verify or prove that they are true. We just choose to believe them.

A few examples. Some people choose to believe that there is a higher being, we usually call Him God. Others choose to believe that there is no such being, that material world is all that there is.

Yet, others choose to believe that this world is just an illusion, and the real world is the spiritual world. Some choose to believe that we live only once. Others choose to believe that we keep returning back again and again.

Some choose to believe that there is no purpose and meaning for us being here. Others choose to believe that the purpose of life is to be happy. This I think is a really strange idea. For how can you come to such a conclusion if you carefully observe how hard and challenging and often miserable our lives are?

But the thing is, these all are ... just beliefs. None of them can be proved in the strict sense of the word. What does this mean? That all human beings, indeed, are people of faith. This is a very important insight.

If you meet someone who says that they are not people of faith, you can assure them that they most certainly are, you know better! The real question is – **whether what they believe is true or not**.

This is a very important insight to understand because what we believe to be true about this world, about God, and about ourselves shapes our lives. It shapes our allegiances, priorities, values, attitudes, our choices and decisions, and so on.

For example, the belief that we are accountable for how we lead our lives will result in a different life than the belief that we are not accountable. You will live differently if you believe that this life is about fulfilling your sexual desires, compared to someone, who may believe that this life is about serving others.

The bottom-line is that we all are people of faith, and what we believe to be true, shapes how we go about this life. Our today's reading also helps us to reflect on exactly this point. Faith and works. The question the Pharisees asked:

“What is the great commandment?” How could we put it in different words? What they were asking was – how to live if you genuinely believe all that the Holy Scripture teaches about God, about the world and about ourselves?

Or we could put it this way – how should we live as Christians? Jesus answers:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” This is how you should live! There are many misunderstandings among Christians when it comes to the relationships between our faith and our lives.

On the one end of the spectrum there is the idea that we should earn God's favour and whatever else He may give us by being good people. But the Holy Spirit says the opposite: “You all are born dead in our sins, there is none who is good, none who searches for God.” Dead people don't earn anything.

On the other end there is the idea that because of what Jesus did, we don't need to do anything anymore. That sounds really sweet. It almost sounds like the Gospel has saved us from... yes, from good works. But the Holy Spirit again says the very opposite: “You are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that you should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10)

Now, what does Jesus' answer mean for us? Jesus teaches us His way, the proper relationship between faith and works, based in the most wonderful, mutually caring and respectful relationship we can imagine. Let's see.

Yes, we are people of faith, and yes, our faith should shape how we live, it should manifest itself. In the sermon on the Mount Jesus says: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father.”

Paul's letters are saturated with exhortations for our new lives in Christ. James, brother of Jesus, speaks about two kinds of faith, one that is faith only in theory, the dead faith, and the other is the faith that manifests in good works.

Luther famously said that we are saved by faith alone, but that the saving faith is never alone. It is living and active. And in our today's reading Jesus teaches us how our faith should shape our lives. He gives us the two Great Commandments, and

the two contain also the rest of them. It is always so joyful to reflect on the Commandments. Why? Because these are not some rules imposed on us. They are the loving will of our personal God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, His will for our relationship with Him and with one another.

The Commandments describe who you are created to be. When we think about the Commandments, first we are drawn to the One, who gave them to us, and reminded that He created you, redeemed you and sent you His Spirit.

When we think about the Commandments, we first need to think about our God who loves you first, with all His heart and all His soul and all His mind. These are not just words; He has shown His affection and commitment in the most extreme way: “Look, I am laying down my life for you, my dear friend!”

He always loves you first, serves you first, commits to you first, and only then He teaches us how to respond to His love. This is where we can test ourselves – whether we truly believe what we say we believe, or perhaps we simply have learned some Biblical teachings, but our lives are guided by different beliefs.

When we believe that God the Father has created you and still gives you the gift of life, what happens? How grateful it makes us! When we believe that Jesus, the Son of God has sacrificed His life for you, what happens? How attracted to Him we are!

When we believe that the Holy Spirit indwells in us and embraces us in the fellowship with the Trinity, what joy and comfort it gives! Just think about this amazing reality, this God comes to you and He pledges His allegiance to you:

“I want to be your God! I formed you! I am with you, always! I want to bless you! I will take you to be with me forever so that I can share with you all that is mine!”
When you hear this, when the Spirit convinces this to be true, you are changed.

When we believe this, we will love our God more than anything and anyone, we will fear to reject or disappoint Him, and we will trust Him and rely on Him more than on anyone or anything else in the entire creation. For He is your God!

Then we want to grasp every word that comes from Him, we thirst to learn what He teaches about Himself, this world and us. Then one of greatest delights is to enjoy familial conversation with Him and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When we believe that our Father’s ears and heart are always open to us, what will we do? Yes, we will turn to Him with everything that is important to us. We will run to Him to share our joys, or to pour out our sorrows and fears, He will be our go-to person in every situation.

When we believe that He desires to be among us and to bless us, that He Himself comes to speak to us the words of forgiveness and Fatherly love, that He unites us with Himself in His Holy Meal, what happens? Then nothing will keep us away from the Divine Service where all of this is given to us. What could be more important?!

When we believe that all authorities are the Father's chosen good tools to bring His abundant blessings to us, then we will gladly honour and obey our parents, our pastors and many others in positions of responsibility.

When we believe that our God is the source of life, that He forms each one of us in mother's womb, we will value and treasure the gift of life, we will fervently protect it in all situations, from its conception to the very end of our lives.

When we believe that our Father has given us the gift of marriage as the place that reminds and teaches us about His love and service to us, we will cherish and rejoice in our marriages and the gift of sexuality, and strive to keep our relationships pure.

When we believe that our Father provides daily bread for us, then we are generous with what He has entrusted to us, then we gladly support the Gospel and those in need. When we believe that you are loved and treasured beyond your imagination, as you are! We are grateful for the life that our God has given to us.

When we believe that our Father desires everyone to be saved, and that our Brother Jesus sacrificed His life for each one of us – we are passionate about inviting everyone in the wonderful fellowship with this God. How can we not?!

When we truly believe all the above – we also live this way. Faith and works. This is what you are created for. This is what you are redeemed for. This is what the Spirit enables you to be and do. This is how we love our God and our neighbours.

One last note. Remember that the commandment “to love” doesn't actually help us to love anyone. It commands, yes, it may reveal that we fail, sure. But it doesn't actually enable us to keep it. The Gospel does. The Holy Spirit does.

When our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit meets you, when He speaks to you and opens to you His kind and friendly heart, when He reveals that He has adopted you to live with Him in His New Creation, when He gently embraces you... as a little and rebellious child... that changes everything.

The divine love is passed from Him to you. The bond of trust is created. The warm affection is stirred up. For when you meet our gracious God, when you truly meet Him, when He touches you, you are changed. You can't remain the same. When you see His zeal for you, you are moved to respond with the same.

This is how true faith and true good works relate. This is how we live as Christians. We believe and therefore we act. That is like two sides of the same coin. They both come from our God, from God who believes in you, and so He acts.

I pray that the Holy Spirit would persuade us to the very core of our hearts that the wonderful Gospel message on which we reflected is indeed true, so that our Christian faith, true and living faith, would manifest itself in beautiful Christian lives.

May it bring great joy to you, may you be a blessing to countless others, and may our lives glorify our God who is your dear Father in heaven.

Amen.