

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
September 16, 2012**

James 1:17-27

First Things First!

- 1. "I can do it myself!"**
- 2. First Things First: It starts with God!**

**Hymns: 238 – 767 –
Distribution: 235 – 520
Closing: 236 (vv. 1,2,5)**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

¹⁹ My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

As I travel along in my young journey in fatherhood, I know that there is a time rapidly approaching when I will hear a phrase repeated over and over again. The time is most likely coming very soon when my daughter Josie figures out that she is independent, and decides that she is quite capable of doing most everything without the help of her parents. I know a time is coming when her favorite phrase will be, "I can do it myself!" Every little child I've ever met goes through a phase where they demand that every task in life be done all on their own. So, whether it be getting dressed for the day or making breakfast in the morning or even going to the bathroom, the overly-confident decree is screamed out, "I can do it myself!" When we hear that phrase from a young child, we can't help but smile and laugh. We smile because though there is so much confidence, we know that they can't do it by themselves. Sure, they might struggle with great determination, and diligently try their hardest again and again, but eventually doing it by themselves will end in failure...and very likely a huge mess!

From our experience with children, we know how futile it can be to think that you can do it yourself when you actually can't. Yet, here's the thing. How many times, as we go through life, don't we stubbornly say, "I can do it myself!"

As we empty the car after a shopping trip, juggling four grocery bags, two gallons of milk, and a coffee into the house, while trying to open the door, we wave off the well-meaning offer of help while proclaiming, "Nah, I've got it myself." As our calendar fills up with task after task and we start to feel overwhelmed, we continue to think, "I can get it done myself." For some reason, from little on up, we have a desire to do everything ourselves. When it comes to the small tasks of life, it probably isn't that big of a deal; however, the attitude often transfers over to the bigger issues in life and the results are nothing to smile about.

When a person is failing in the fight against temptation and losing the battle to addiction, they refuse to get help, arguing that they can overcome it by themselves. When a couple is sliding apart in their marriage, they reason that reconciliation can be accomplished all by themselves. When a person's life goes up and down with depression, they think that the battle can be won all by themselves.

Most stubbornly, and most tragically, people most often boast, "I can do it myself!" when it comes to their eternal standing with God. When a person's conscience tells them that they will one day have to answer to God for what they have done in this life, they reason that they can get "right" in their

relationship with God all by themselves. When a person is told that Jesus Christ is the only way to get to heaven, people scoff because that route doesn't allow for them to do it all by themselves. When a person knows that a solution is needed, they will naturally look around and say, "I can do it myself!" For people who love to say, "I can do it myself," the Book of James can, at first glance, appear to tell us that there is much that we can accomplish through our own actions. While Paul is famous for his letters that stress the fact that we are saved by grace, through faith, apart from works; many look at the Book of James and think that he places the importance on works. And as we look at the Book of James, we will certainly see that it is a call to action. In 108 verses of his letter to the New Testament Christians, James uses 54 imperatives. That means that every other verse tells the reader "to do." Do this and good results will follow. Do this and you will please God. Do this and things will go well for you in life. That constant call to action, highlighted by James saying, "Faith without works is dead," has led people to question whether James taught that each person has an opening to say, "I can do it myself!" or at least I can take some credit for my life of good works.

However, to truly understand James' position on the role of faith and the role of works, we must listen to James' entire message. Today, as we begin a five-week look at his letter, James exclaims, "First Things First!" Before you get into all of those encouragements to "do;" before you see me talking so much about the role of works, you need to hear this first. It starts, and it really finishes, with God doing the work!

James says in chapter 1, ***"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."*** (James 1:17-18)

James begins his call to action with a reminder that God is the Giver of every gift. Most importantly, he is the giver of our complete salvation, from beginning to end. When man had broken the rules and lost hope, God gave a plan that would accomplish what man could not do on his own. He would send a Savior who would "do" perfectly what man on his own could only fall short in doing. And that Savior came down from God the Father just as he had promised. And Jesus Christ put into action what God had planned. He did the work, he lived the perfect life, he died the sacrificial death on the cross. And because we can't do any of it by ourselves, God also chose to give us birth through the word of truth. He chose us

by his grace. He sent his Holy Spirit to work faith in our hearts when we heard the message of our Savior. He continues to forgive our sins and strengthen our faith through baptism and the Lord's Supper. James very clearly tells us that we can't do it ourselves. From plan of action to individual, God has done it all for each one of us.

And that fills us with great assurance. If we had to do it ourselves, or if we had to even do part of it ourselves, our lives would be filled with doubt and a constant need to do more. But when James tells us that God has given everything that we need, that doubt leaves us. We know that this faith works because it has all been accomplished by God.

And those two verses about what God has done for us are really the springboard into the rest of this great book of the Bible. When we read those two verses, there is not one of us who could claim, "I can do it by myself!" because those two verses tell us that every good in our lives comes from God.

It starts with salvation and the gift of faith, but God also then equips every single of those that he calls to produce fruit. And it is that life of producing fruit as a result of what God has done for us that James expands on throughout his letter. When the gifts and the motivation are provided by God, the possibilities for what will result in this life are endless. God's plan produces a faith that works to do good. As we look at James' encouragement over the next few weeks, we will see him talk about almost every area of Christian life. As we read his words, we will see him jump quickly from one thought to the next, seemingly trying to cover as much as he can as quickly as he can. As he does so, James urges each one of us to display a faith that works, but not so that we can say that we have done it ourselves. He urges us to have a faith that works to show our thanks for what God has given to each one of us, and to witness to others what has already been accomplished for them.

And that is always our motivation for living and doing in this life. As we come and hear what God has done and given to us, we go out and respond with a life of thankfulness and selfless service. May our time in James encourage and motivate you to grow in a faith that works in the world around you. But as you work, remember first things first: God is at the heart and source of everything that you do.