

Jessica was happy. She had just started attending a new church. For the first time in her life, she felt like she was really living her faith. The congregation was medium-sized but it was growing quickly. Sermons were interesting. Music was exciting. There were so many things to do at church. Jessica had her pick of Bible classes to attend. She had countless opportunities to volunteer in the community. The members at this church let the light of their faith shine brightly and Jessica loved it.

Fast forward 3 years. The church was still active. The church was still growing. Jessica was still happy... on the outside. Something was off. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. All her friends knew her to be this great Christian. She just felt all this pressure. She struggled to do the right thing but sometimes she just couldn't. She knew she shouldn't blow up at her kids. She knew her yelling matches with her husband were eroding her marriage. She tried to try harder. She tried to double down but she was tired. Tired of pretending. Tired of going to church and putting on a smile. Everyone else seemed to have it together. Why didn't she? She felt so guilty!

Is it possible for a church and its members to look like they're thriving when really they're dying? Like a bright red apple, flawless and delicious on the outside until you bite into it and realize it's rotten to the core. Not only is it possible, but it's also something every one of us needs to watch out for.

A part of us is absolutely convinced there is something we can do for God. A part of us believes that if we try and try then God will be happy with us. This leads to one of two things. Either we get crushed by guilt and despair like Jessica or we become prideful. Both of these kill faith.

We have two ditches, despair, and pride. They are such easy ditches to slip into. Satan uses our own good works against us. Good works that look great to everyone around us. We know we should diligently get our work done. We know we shouldn't lose our temper. We know we should stay away from that one website. We know we should... you fill in the blank. This would please God. This is what will make him happy. But we don't. So we beat ourselves up. "It was so simple, how did you mess this up?" Then we rally our conscience. We pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. Next time we won't fail. The thing about pulling yourself up by the bootstraps is it's impossible. We fall into a cycle of try harder and fail, try again and fail. We sin and we sin and we sin again. Guilt crushes us.

What about the other ditch. Is it possible for us with our great Lutheran theology to fall into pride? How could we? We teach the Bible as the Word of God. We understand God's plan for marriage. We take God at his word that he created the world. We can explain the real presence of the Lord's Supper. We know the difference between the hypostatic union and the genus majestaticum! You get my point. If we think we're so much better than all the other Christians. If we think we're safe—that God is going to congratulate us because we got all his doctrines right—we need to watch out. If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.

Both pride and despair come from the same misplaced trust. They come from putting our trust in ourselves. Wake up and repent. Jesus is coming soon. If we're leaning on our own good deeds, we're in trouble.

This is the problem that was going on in Sardis. Jesus knew the terrible danger that congregation was in. So Jesus himself warns them. **"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead... For I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God"** Good deeds make you look good before other people. But good deeds do nothing for you before God. Imagine a little boy diligently making mud pies. He is pouring his heart and soul into those mud pies. They are some of the most beautiful mud pies you have ever laid eyes on. He takes his three best mud pies and displays them proudly on his mom's new white couch. Mom comes home to see her boy covered head to toe in mud beaming next to three lumps of mud that are oozing into the fabric of the couch. Will she be happy? Isaiah once wrote all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. That's all we are before God, filthy beggars proudly handing him filthy rags. Everything we do is dripping with sin. Yes, faith without works is dead, but works without faith are just as useless.

Jesus was coming soon. Those members would never ever know when he was coming. If their readiness plan was to offer Jesus their own good deeds, they were in for a rude awakening.

But Jesus cared for this congregation. He cared too much to let them quietly die off. Wake up! He calls to them. Strengthen what remains. Remember what you have received and heard. This congregation had heard the gospel. Jesus had taken their sins away. Jesus had covered their filthy rags with perfect white clothes of righteousness. Some of the members had forgotten. They had turned instead to their own works and soiled their clothes but it wasn't too late. They needed to repent. That is they needed to realize their works were nothing before God. Jesus invited them to turn to him. To put their trust in him. Then they would be the victorious ones. They would walk with him. He would clothe them all in white once again.

Jesus continues to pour out these beautiful promises. He will never blot their name from the book of life. No sin they could ever commit could screw this up for them. Before, by trusting in their own deeds they could never be certain. They could never know if they'd done enough. Now they could always be certain that Jesus had done enough. Jesus was going to acknowledge them before God the Father and all the angels. He was going to claim them as his very own.

Whether we are falling into despair or reveling in pride, Jesus calls us to wake up. Remember and repent! All of our righteous acts are like filthy rags. So don't put your trust in those filthy rags. Put your trust in Jesus.

Remember what Jesus has done for you. You were like that little boy making mud pies. Soiled by sin and guilt. He takes you and scrubs away the prideful mud from making all those useless works. He reaches down and pulls you out of that dirty puddle of despair. He gives you new clothes. Clothes he made himself. Clothes he washed in his own blood. Clothes that shine brighter than snow. He takes you before God and says this one is mine.

But how can we be sure? What about when we sin again. Because we know we will. Jesus has written your name down in the book of life. No one can remove it. Nothing you do

could smear that ink. This picture is common in comics and cartoons. Someone dies so they float up to heaven and there before them is this great golden gate. In front of the gate is a man with a big beard and a big book. He asks for your name, looks you up and says something like, "Ah yes, Tim. I see in third grade you cheated on a math test..." he goes on to list every sin you've ever committed. That's not how it's going to be. You'll get to heaven, Jesus will look you up in his book, and under your name, it will say, "Paid in full by the blood of Christ." Our salvation is not dependent on how good of a Christian we are, but how good of a savior we have. And if you didn't earn your salvation, how can you unearn it?

So then, are good works bad? No, good works are good. It's just that good works are not how we get to heaven. They're not how we grow and nourish our faith. Good works are a result of faith. I once heard this story about a pastor. When he was a little boy his family had a cherry tree. It had the most beautiful cherry blossoms you've ever seen. One day the boy's father asked him to water the tree. So being an obedient son he got the hose and started watering the flowers. Every single one of those flowers fell off. If you want to nourish a tree to grow more flowers, you water the roots. If you want a Christian to do more good works, you don't force them to do more good works, you nourish their faith. You do this with the gospel. Only the good news that we are forgiven. That our sins are removed. That we are perfect in God's sight. Only this can spur us on to do acts of love. These good works done in faith, these are complete in God's sight. They have been made perfect by Christ himself.

What about our good old Lutheran orthodoxy? Is that bad because it's a possible source of pride? No! it's something to be immensely thankful for. It's something to guard and cherish and protect. Not because our good doctrine is going to get us into heaven. But because good doctrine protects the precious message of the gospel. It keeps anything from blurring or distorting that message.

If you are looking at yourself in a mirror that is covered in dirt and scratches. You won't notice if there's a smudge on your face or something stuck in your teeth. If we allow the Bible to be obscured by false teaching, we can't see how much we need a savior. We can't see how much our Savior has done for us. That's why it's so important to teach God's word correctly. That's why it's so important to choose a church based on what they teach.

It's human nature to want to go to an active church with lots of people, that sings songs and plays music we like, and that has interesting sermons. But if we choose a church that way we could wind up in a church like the one in Sardis. Good on the outside, dead on the inside. The gospel is the only way to decide on a church. Is the gospel rightly proclaimed in word and sacrament? Do the teachings of the church do everything they can to protect that gospel?

Wake up! Repent and remember! Don't put your confidence in outward things. Don't put your confidence in what you do. Put your confidence in Christ. He scrubs you clean of your sin. He clothes you in white robes. Nothing will blot your name from the book of life.