



## **Congratulations to our 2024 Confirmation Class:** Haddie Fearman, Sophia Seys, Clara Ward, Ethan Taylor, & Caden Leng

### **The Works of Love**

Matthew 22:35-40

Sunday, April 28, 2024, Aledo UMC

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My sermon today is entitled “The Works of Love.” And I’m preaching this message mindful that today is Confirmation Sunday. I want to begin by setting confirmation first in the larger context of the Christian church. Then I want to set confirmation in the context of scripture. In the process, I also want to present confirmation as a means of grace.

Confirmation came about when, for a variety of reasons, the early church began practicing infant baptism. At the same time, there was an awareness that the baptized child needed to have a formal way of saying that the decision my parents—or godparents—made for me to be baptized into the Body of Christ was the right decision. Consequently, confirmation is closely tied to baptism. In the Catholic Church, confirmation became one of seven sacraments because in Catholicism, the sacraments were designed to carry you from cradle to grave.

That means that in the Catholic Church, the way to be saved was to do the sacraments. However, that ruffled the feathers of a 34-year-old Catholic priest named Martin Luther. He was

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a professor of theology at Wittenberg University in Germany, and he concluded that practicing the sacraments amounted to being saved by works. And Luther emphasized that we are “saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.”

Luther, as we know, became the first Protestant reformer and he along with other Protestant reformers concluded that two of the seven sacraments stood apart from the other five, and those two practices have been retained by all Protestant denominations as sacraments. Those two, of course, are baptism and communion.

In the Bible, baptism is introduced to us when Jesus is baptized at the beginning of his public ministry:

<sup>9</sup> At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:9-11)

Jesus was baptized because he said it was the will of God for him to be baptized. After his resurrection, Jesus entrusted the ministry of baptism to his disciples and, by extension, to us. Christian baptism marks our new identity in Christ. It’s an outward sign of an inward change, an inward grace, and is therefore a means of grace.

Some churches only baptize persons who have made a profession of their faith in Christ. Other churches primarily baptize infants, and of course, they are not old enough to make a profession of faith. The United Methodist Church does both.

When we baptize adults, we celebrate God’s love and justifying grace. The one who is baptized is cleansed and incorporated into Christ’s body.

In the baptism of children and infants, we celebrate God’s unconditional love and promise for their lives, God’s claiming of that person. However, infant baptism is intended to be affirmed through confirmation later in life when the child essentially says, “My parents made the right choice for me when they had me baptized. I want to live for Jesus.”

One of my favorite stories about baptism is found in Acts 16:25-34 and it occurs after Paul and Silas had been arrested for proclaiming the gospel in Philippi.

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

<sup>31</sup> They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” <sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house

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and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

I love that story because it embraces both believers' baptism as well as infant baptism. The jailer was baptized because he became a believer in Christ. But his family—including any children, infants, or even servants who may have been present—his family was baptized because Dad said, "I believe you should be baptized."

Baptism does not save us from sin, death, or the devil. Baptism is not some sort of spiritual "vaccine." The thief on the cross was not baptized, yet we know that he went to heaven because Christ himself said so from the cross.

We encounter the grace of God through both baptism and confirmation (or the reaffirmation of our faith). That means baptism—along with confirmation—are properly understood as means of grace. They are our responses to the grace of God.

Of course, there are other means of grace. That is to say, there are other ways in which we might encounter the grace of God. But what are those means of grace?

Means of grace fall into two categories: **Works of Piety** and **Works of Mercy**. Then, within each of those categories are **Individual Practices** and **Communal Practices**.

**Works of Piety** are acts of worship and devotion to God. They are basic practices that enable us to participate in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Individual practices of piety include reading, meditating, and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, and even healthy living.

Communal practices of piety include regularly attending worship, regularly sharing in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (which includes mutual accountability), and Bible study.

**Works of Mercy** are actions we can perform which extend God's compassion and mercy to others, especially to those in need. Individual practices of mercy include doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others.

Communal practices of mercy include seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination. For example, John Wesley challenged Methodists to work to bring about the end of slavery. Other communal practices include addressing the needs of the poor and sharing our faith with others.

If we're not careful, we might get the idea that we engage in these means of grace in order to be saved. But we're not saved by works; we cannot earn our salvation by "doing good." Martin Luther challenged the notion of doing *anything* to secure or earn our salvation. Rather, Luther stressed that we are saved by faith, not works. Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians:

<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:8-10).

We have a couple of Bible studies in our church where participants are—or soon will be—digging into the book of James. Seemingly in direct contrast to Paul, James wrote that

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“faith without works is dead” (James 2:14-26). So how are we to resolve the tension between these two scriptural propositions of faith and works?

I think Christ gives us the key, so let’s go to the words of Jesus in Matthew 22:

<sup>35</sup> One of [the Pharisees], an expert in the law, tested him with this question: <sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Rather than thinking about the means of grace in terms of works, think about the means of grace in terms of *LOVE*. You can categorize the means of grace according to the great commandments. **Works of piety are how we love God:** we love God through prayer, reading the scriptures, and fully devoting ourselves to him.

**Works of mercy are how we love neighbor.** As we saw in Ephesians 2:10, “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Likewise, consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

<sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

<sup>37</sup> “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

<sup>40</sup> “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

We love neighbor by feeding the hungry, quenching the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the needy, and visiting the sick and the imprisoned. And as we love neighbor, we love Jesus. The means of grace are how we respond to God’s love for us.

Among the many things our confirmation students learned over our 18-session is we learned about the means of grace. And we practiced some of those means of grace, most notably when all of our students helped fill the rice meal packets which have been shipped to Spanish Town, Jamaica, on April 16. Now they are going to embark on yet another means of grace in the form of Confirmation.