

Year A 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Dt 11:18, 26-28, 32; Ps 31; Rom 3:21-25, 28; Mt 7:21-27

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We have an interesting set of readings today: they combine Bible passages that appear to say different, even contradictory, things. The first reading and the gospel stress the importance of the “works of the Law,” while the second reading extols our free justification in Christ “apart from [the works] of the Law”: for Paul, we are saved by faith and not works. Thus some explanation is in order.

The first reading is from the last book of the Torah, the “Law.” Jewish tradition (which is much like our Catholic Tradition) counts 613 commandments. Mt 5:17-19 quotes Jesus as saying that he came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets (our “Old Testament”), but to fulfill, and that even the smallest bits of the Law must be fulfilled, and that whoever breaks even the least of the commandments will be least in the Kingdom of Heaven. So at some level we can take the first reading at its word.

In the second reading, however, Paul is at pains to stress that we were “justified,” made righteous before God, freely by Christ, independently of works, which do not justify anyone (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16). This is how the “Law and the Prophets” were perfectly fulfilled (Rom 3:21; Lk 24:44). But misunderstandings or abuses of Paul’s teaching led to such correctives as Jas 2:24, “one is justified by works and not by faith alone.” And the gospel reading from Matthew insists that mere talk without doing the will of God does not grant entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, the only description of the Last Judgment which we have in any detail is in Mt 25:31-46, the famous “I was hungry and you gave me to eat” passage. There, recognizing Jesus or not is immaterial; we are to be judged by how we attended to the “least” of his brothers and sisters.

A brief explanation of all this is that we are to do as Jesus did: love to the end (Jn 13:1; 15:12-13). We are to love even our enemies, Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27, 35. Only thus can we share Christ’s Spirit, the Spirit which led him to offering his life for us (Hb 9:14), and who will raise us up as he was raised, Rom 8:1-13.