

[ANOTHER FINE SERMON ON THE IMPORTANCE OF BELIEVING CHRIST'S RESURRECTION AND THE MARCAN GREAT COMMISSION.]

Sermon for the Day of Christ's Ascension; Mark 16:14-20 (2nd sermon)

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil, 1522.

1. In today's Gospel there is again presented to us the essence of a Christian life, namely faith and love; just what you constantly hear in all the Gospel lessons. Since the Gospel ever holds up before you this theme, we must continually preach and discuss it; for Jesus says to his disciples: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." We will consider the thoughts of this Gospel text in order.

I. CHRIST UPBRAIDS HIS DISCIPLES WITH THEIR UNBELIEF.

2. First, Christ upbraids his disciples with their unbelief and hardness of heart, and reproves them for it, and shows them their faults. He does not reject them, nor deal too severely with them, but reproves them; just as we would say to a person: Are you not ashamed that you dared to do such a thing? Meaning thereby to bring him to a knowledge of himself and make him blush with shame, that he may desist from his wicked intent or deed, though we do not reject him, nor turn our love from him.

3. However, it is not an insignificant matter here that the Lord rebuked the disciples; for unbelief is the greatest sin that can be named. Christ tells them the cause of their unbelief when he says that their hearts are hardened, yet he deals mildly and gently with them.

4. This is given to us all for our comfort, lest we despair when, lacking in faith, we doubt, stumble and fall; it is to help us to rise again, to strengthen our faith and lift up our hearts to God, that we may grasp and hold fast the confidence of God, who does not deal with us severely, but can indeed bear with us and overlook much. And whoever believes him to be thus, shall find him so; if we hold him to be a merciful God, he allows himself to be found merciful, and shows himself thus to us; but a bad conscience and an unbelieving heart have no such trust in God, but flee from him, and deem him a harsh Judge, which he, therefore, is found to be.

5. So should we also deal with our neighbour. If we see him fall from the faith, or err and sin, we should not strengthen him in his wickedness, nor justify his cause, but admonish him, and in meekness reprove his faults, yet neither hold enmity, nor turn our love from him. Thus St. Paul speaks to the Galatians: Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Gal 6, 1. But our lord pope, the bishops, priests, monks and nuns allow no one to reprove them when they do evil; they are never willing to acknowledge that any fault is theirs, but always that of their subjects, and their policy toward subjects is one of strictness and severity.

6. To sum up all: We should expose and reprove what is wrong, and exercise truth and love toward everybody; we should be plain-spoken, not letting ourselves be silenced, for none of us, since we are flesh and blood, will so live as to be found without blame in all things. I in this, you in that. We all see, that even the apostles were lacking in the chief things yet they were corner stones, the foundations and the very best part of Christendom.

7. But let no one think that the apostles were altogether unbelieving; they believed what was written in the Law

and the prophets, although their faith was not yet perfect. There was a faith there and yet no faith; they did not yet believe all things, although they believed that God created heaven and earth, and was the Maker of every creature. So the apostles were not altogether without faith, for they had faith in part. Faith is a thing that always grows. It is with faith as with a man who is ill and begins to get well - is increasing in strength. Therefore the Lord shows where they did not believe, and what they lacked; it was that they did not believe the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Although they believed the other things, they were still lacking in this. I hold that they believed that they had a gracious God. Yet this was not enough; they must believe also the resurrection of Christ. The Lord upbraided them with their unbelief, reproved them and said that in spite of all they had seen, they were not believing, they still lacked in a certain article of faith, namely the article on the resurrection. Hence Christ's words to them at the Last Supper: "Ye believe in God, believe also in me." Jn 14, 1.

8. What does it mean, then, to believe the resurrection of Christ, this thing which is so important, and concerning which the disciples were called unbelieving and faithless, and without which nothing else that they believed would help them? To believe the resurrection of Christ, is nothing else than to believe that we have a Mediator before God. Who is Christ, who makes us holy and acceptable to God the Father. For man's possessions, by birth and nature, are but sin and corruption, by which he brings down upon himself the wrath of God. But God is eternal righteousness and purity, and therefore, from his very nature, hates sin. Hence there is always enmity between God and the natural man, and they cannot be friends and in harmony with one another.

9. For this cause, Christ became man and took upon himself our sins and also the wrath of the Father, and drowned them both in himself, thus reconciling us to God the Father. Without this faith, we are children of wrath, able to do no good work that is pleasing to God, nor can our prayers be acceptable before him. For thus it is written in Ps 18, 41: "They cried, but there was none to save; even unto Jehovah, but he answered them not." Yea, even our noblest deeds, by which we had thought to obtain from God mercy, help and comfort, are counted to us for sin; as the prophet says, Ps 109, 7: "Let his prayer be turned into sin"; seeing God could not be reconciled by all our strength, for there is truly no strength in us.

10. Therefore Christ must come, that he might go before the Father's face, reconcile us to him, and obtain for us everything we lacked. Through this same Christ we must ask of God all we need. You have heard in last Sunday's Gospel that the Lord says: "If ye shall ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name." Whatever we obtain from God, we must receive through this Christ, who has gained for us a merciful Father. For Christ is our support and refuge, where we may hide ourselves, like the young chickens hide under the wings of the mother hen. Through him alone is our prayer acceptable before God and through him is it answered, and we obtain the favour and mercy of the Father; for Christ has made atonement for our sins, and an angry judge he has changed into a gracious and merciful God. To believe in the resurrection of Christ means, then, to believe, as I said, that Christ has taken upon his head our sins and the sins of the whole world, also the wrath of the Father, and thus drowned them both in himself, whereby we are become reconciled with God and altogether righteous.

11. Now, observe for yourselves how few Christians there are who have this faith, by which alone man is freed from his sins and becomes entirely holy; for they believe not in the resurrection of Christ, that their sins are taken away through Christ, since they attempt to become holy through their own works, This one runs to a cloister, that one becomes a nun, one does this, another that, in order to be free from sin; and yet they always say they believe in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, notwithstanding that their works prove the contrary.

12. The apostles have insisted upon and preached this article more than any other; thus St. Paul speaks to the Corinthians: "If Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain." I Cor 15, 14. And shortly, after in verse 17 he says: "If Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." What sort of a conclusion is this? What is its logical analysis? This: If Christ be not risen from the dead, then sin and death have devoured and slain him, and we cannot get rid of our sins ourselves. Jesus Christ took them upon himself, so that he might tread under foot sin, death and hell, and become their master. But if he be not risen, then he has not overcome sin, but has been overcome by sin. Also, if he has been overcome by sin, then he is not risen: if he be not risen, then he has not redeemed you; then you are yet in your sins. Likewise Paul speaks to the Romans: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him

from the dead, thou shalt be saved." Rom 10, 9. Thereto all the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments agree.

13. Now, it is not enough that we believe the historic fact of the resurrection of Christ; for this all the wicked believe, yea, even the devil believes that Christ has suffered and is risen. But we must believe also the meaning--the spiritual significance of Christ's resurrection, realizing its fruit and benefits, that which we have received through it, namely, forgiveness and redemption from all sins; we must believe that Christ has suffered death, and thereby has overcome and trodden under foot sin and death, yea, everything that can harm us, and is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven as Almighty Lord over sin and devil, death and hell, and all that harms us, and that all this took place for our good. This the wicked do not believe.

14. You see how much depends upon this article of faith on the resurrection. We can better dispense with all the other articles than with this one. What would it avail if we believed all the other articles, as that Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, died and was buried, if we did not believe that he arose again? It is to this subject that God has reference in Habakkuk 1, 5, when he says: "I am working a work in your days, which ye will not believe though it be told you."

15. The importance of this subject is also the reason that Paul has urged and preached it, and in all his epistles has treated of no work or miracle of Christ so frequently as of his resurrection. He is silent concerning the many works and wonders of Christ, and preaches and teaches emphatically the benefit and the import of the resurrection of Christ--what we have received from it. No other apostle has portrayed Christ to us in the light that Paul has. Christ did not without meaning say of him to Ananias: "He is a chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel; for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake." Acts 9, 15-16.

16. Now, no good work will help those who do not have this faith in the resurrection, let them play the hypocrite as they will. To virgins, their virginity or purity is no help; nor to monks their long prayers. Here it avails nothing to preach of works, they are not even named; but everything must be obtained of God through Christ, as you have heard. So David prayed in Ps 84, 9: "Behold, O God, our shield, and look upon the face of thine anointed." This is enough on the first part of this Gospel. Now follows in the text the words: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation."

II. THE MISSIONARY COMMISSION CHRIST GIVES TO HIS DISCIPLES.

A. The Contents of This Commission.

17. What shall they preach? Nothing else, he says, than just that I am risen from the dead and have overcome and taken away sin and all misery. He that believes this, shall be saved; faith alone is sufficient for his salvation. Therefore, the Gospel is nothing else than preaching the resurrection of Christ: "He that believeth shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." Here all works are abolished. Here you see, also, the nature and character of faith. Faith will compel no one to accept the Gospel, but leaves its acceptance free to everyone and makes it a personal matter. He that believes, believes; he that comes, comes; he that stays out, stays out.

18. Thus you see that the pope errs and does the people injustice in that he ventures to drive them to faith by force; for the Lord commanded the disciples to do nothing more than to preach the Gospel. So the disciples also did; they preached the Gospel, and left its acceptance to those who would take it, and they did not say: Believe, or I will put you to death.

19. A question arises about this passage, "Go ye into all the world," as to how it is to be understood, since the apostles certainly did not visit all the world. No apostle came hither to us; and many a heathen island has since been discovered, where the Gospel has never been preached. Yet the Scriptures say: "Their sound went out into all the earth." Rom 10, 18. Answer: Their preaching went out into all the world, although it has not yet come into all the world. This going out has been begun and continues, although it is not yet completed; the Gospel,

however, will be preached ever farther and wider, until the judgment day. When this preaching shall have reached all parts of the world, and shall have been everywhere heard, then will the message be complete and its mission accomplished; then will the last day also be at hand.

20. The preaching of this message may be likened to a stone thrown into the water, producing ripples which circle outward from it, the waves rolling always on and on, one driving the other, till they come to the shore. Although the center becomes quiet, the waves do not rest, but move forward. So it is with the preaching of the Word. It was begun by the apostles, and it constantly goes forward, is pushed on farther and farther by the preachers, driven hither and thither into the world, yet always being made known to those who never heard it before, although it be arrested in the midst of its course and is condemned as heresy. As we say, when one sends a message, the message has gone forth, although it has not yet arrived at its destination, but is still on its way; or as we say that the emperor's message is sent to Nurenburg, or to the Turk, although it has not yet arrived: so we are to understand the preaching of the apostles.

B. The Promise Attached To This Commission.

21. But there arises here another question from this passage of today's Gospel, "He that believeth, shall be saved:" whether faith is sufficient for salvation, and alone saves; or whether we must also do good works in order to be saved. Here our highly learned doctors have desired to control the Holy Spirit, to sharpen his tongue, and to place a little stick under his tongue, as if he could not speak plainly, and have forced and strained this passage, and so worn it out and rent it that no marrow nor vitality remains in it. They have said that good works are necessary to faith, and that faith is not sufficient for salvation. This is not true. Faith alone, of itself, without any works, as the Word of God here clearly says, brings us salvation, and works help nothing at all toward righteousness or salvation. We must let this passage stand bare and unadulterated, and without any addition. If the Holy Spirit had so desired, he could easily have said different words thus: "He that believeth and doeth works, shall be saved." But he did not do this, therefore we should and will leave it as it is.

22. This I say to the end that you may fortify yourselves with such passages, holding to the true meaning of the words. Though there are many passages in Scripture teaching that faith alone saves, yet they have been so covered over and obscured, so shaken to pieces and stretched, by the sophists and scholars, that their right meaning has suffered. St. Paul says to the Galatians: "If righteousness is through the Law, then Christ died for naught." Gal 2, 21. That is to say: If we can be saved in any other way or work out our salvation, then Christ has died in vain; for to presume to be justified by the Law means to think that man can become righteous through his works.

23. Therefore to conclude: The chief righteousness is faith; the chief wickedness is unbelief. There is also no sin so great that it is able to condemn man; unbelief alone condemns all who are condemned. And again, only faith saves every one; for faith alone deals with God, no works can appear before him. For works have to do only with man, and man lets his works be made use of as he has made use of Christ's. They make no one holy; they are only the distinguishing marks of a man that has already become righteous through faith, which alone makes the heart pure.

24. I can easily assent to the saying: Works do not make you pious, but show that you are pious; or when I hear it said: He that believes, serves his neighbour, I admit that it is so. But that the explanation of this text should be, Faith is not sufficient for salvation, we must also do good--this is a liberty which the text can stand just as little as this church could stand that I should pull down its pillars. There follows further in the text: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."

25. God has always accompanied his Word with an outward sign to make it the more effective to us, that we might be strengthened in heart and never doubt his Word, nor waver. Thus he gave Noah the rainbow in the heavens as a sure sign that he would keep his promise and not destroy the world by another flood. The rainbow is, so to speak, a seal or sign to Noah and to us all, just as a seal upon a letter certifies the document. And just as a nobleman has his own coat-of-arms of a particular device or colour, by which he is known, so has God

evidenced his words for us with signs, as with a seal, that we should never doubt. To Abraham he gave the rite of circumcision, to show that Christ should come and bless the world. Thus has he done here, adding to this promise of his--"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved"--an outward sign, namely baptism, and also the sacrament of the bread and the wine, which was especially instituted for use in times of temptation, and when death draws near, that by it we might strengthen our faith, and remind God of his promise, and hold him to it.

26. A man can believe even though he be not baptized; for baptism is nothing more than an outward sign that is to remind us of the divine promise. If we can have it, it is well; let us receive it, for no one should despise it. If, however, we can not receive it, or it is denied us, we will not be condemned if we only believe the Gospel. For where the Gospel is, there is also baptism and all that a Christian needs. Condemnation follows no sin except the sin of unbelief. Therefore, the Lord says: "He that disbelieveth shall be condemned"; he says not: He that is not baptized. He is silent concerning baptism; for baptism is worth nothing without faith, but is like seals affixed to a letter in which nothing is written. He that has the signs that we call sacraments, and has no faith, has only seals upon a letter of blank paper.

27. Here you see also what is the office of the apostles, to which all the bishops, and those that call themselves ministers, should conform, inasmuch as they boast that they are the successors of the apostles in preaching the Gospel. For the Lord says here, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel." Therefore, we should not listen to those who do not preach the Gospel. Now our papists come along and quote the passage in Luke 10, 16: "He that heareth you, heareth me." This verse has hitherto been the pope's sword, by which he has swayed the whole world, and none has rightly understood this passage, which means that teachers are to be obeyed only when they preach the Gospel. So the Lord here inspires the apostles to speak the Gospel, which is his Word. Christ alone is to be heard, and the apostles are but messengers and instruments for this word of Christ. Therefore, here again are condemned pope, bishops, monks and priests, and all who preach something else than the Gospel.

28. But what is meant when the Lord says: "Preach the Gospel to the whole creation"? Shall I preach also to trees and stones, mountains and waters? What would that profit? St. Gregory preached on this text and said that "all creation" means man; that man is one with all creatures--with the angels in understanding, with the animals in sensibilities, and with the trees in growth. We must, therefore, not misuse the text nor make its meaning too literal, for so we shall misconstrue it. The meaning is that the Gospel should be publicly and universally preached, given to all; it should hide in no corner, but be preached freely in all places, as is written in Ps 19, 3-4: "There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." The beginning and going forth has been fulfilled by the apostles, but the work is not yet finished; the Gospel has not yet reached its limit, for I know not whether Germany has ever heard the Word of God. The pope's word we have surely heard.

29. The Lord here says to the apostles: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation," for the reason that this Gospel may be published to everyone, so that even trees and stones might hear if they had ears, and might bear witness that we have heard the Gospel; and that pillar there might say, I have heard the Gospel preached to you. Thus generally and publicly shall it be proclaimed, and preached in all the world, being withheld from no one, till it reaches the ends of the world, as the Psalm records. So it has now come to us, who are dwelling at the end of the world, for we live close to the sea. This Paul has in mind when he says to the Ephesians: "And he gave some to be apostles, and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God." Eph 4, 11-13. Next, the text speaks of the signs that shall follow faith, and names five signs, one after the other, thus: "And these signs shall accompany them that believe: in my name shall they cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in no wise hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover."

30. How shall we proceed here that we may preserve the truth of the passage: he that believeth shall have power

also, and be able to show these signs? For the Lord says all these signs shall accompany them. Now we know that the apostles did not present all the signs, for we read of no other that drank poison than John the Evangelist, and there are no other individual instances. If the passage shall stand literally, then few believers will be cleared and few saints be entitled to heaven; for these signs, one and all, have not accompanied them, though they have had power to work signs, and have exhibited some of them.

31. Some rush on here and explain these signs as spiritual, so as to preserve the honour of the saints; but it will not do to strain the words. They do not carry such meaning, therefore they will not bear such an explanation. It puts upon the Scriptures uncertain construction for us.

32. Others, with equal heedlessness, say that though not every individual has the power and does the wonders mentioned, yet the church as a whole, the multitude of Christendom, has; one may drive out devils, another heal the sick, and so on. Therefore, they say, such signs are a manifestation of the Spirit; where the signs are, there is also the Christian Church, and so on.

33. But these words do not refer to the Church as a whole, but to each person separately. The meaning is: If there is a Christian who has faith, he shall have power to do these accompanying miracles, and they shall follow him, as Christ says, in John 14, 12: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do," for a Christian has equal power with Christ, is a congregation, and sits with him in joint tenure. The Lord has given Christians power, as is written in Mt 10, 8, also against the unclean spirits, that they might cast them out and heal every disease. Thus it is written in Ps 91, 13: "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent shalt thou trample under foot."

34. We read also that this has been fulfilled. There was once a patriarch in the wilderness, who, when he met a serpent, took it in both hands and tore it in two, and thought no more about it, but said: O what a fine thing it is to have a clear and guiltless conscience! So, where there is a Christian, there is still the power to work these signs if it is necessary. But no one should attempt to exercise this power if it is not necessary or if need does not compel. The apostles did not always exercise it, but only made use of it to prove the Word of God, to confirm it by the miracles; as is written here in the text: "And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the Word by the signs that followed."

35. But since the Gospel has now been spread abroad, and made known to all the world, there is no need of working miracles as in the apostles' times. If need should arise, and men were to denounce and antagonize the Gospel, then we verily should have to employ wonder-working rather than permit the Gospel to be derided and suppressed. But I hope such a course will not be necessary, and that such a contingency will never arise. For another example: That I should here speak in new languages is not at all necessary, since you all can well hear and understand me; but if God should send me where the people could not understand me, he could easily grant me their speech or language, that I might be understood.

36. Then, let no one, without pressing need, undertake to work wonders. For we read of the patriarchs' children that they once brought a large number of serpents in their cloaks, and shook them out at their parents' feet; whereupon their parents reprov'd them for tempting God unnecessarily. In like manner, we read of many signs that believers have done. It happened once upon a time that one of the fathers by chance got hold of a basilisk. He looked at it, and thereupon exclaimed: O Lord, I must die, or this reptile must! for the basilisk kills by its looks. At once it bursted and flew into pieces.

37. I know not what I shall say about those who venture to do signs where they are not necessary. For example, some drive out demons. But I know that it is a dangerous undertaking. The devil, indeed, lets himself be driven out, but he does not intend to suffer for it; he allows it only that he may strengthen the sign-worker in such error. I would not like to trust him. We have many such instances in our times. I know also of many that happened not long ago.

38. There was a sexton who wished to learn alchemy from the devil, that is, the art of separating gold from sand,

and of making gold from other metals. The devil agreed to come to him at the hour of eleven, but the sexton should have on a gown and chasuble. See with what fool's work the devil goes about! As though he cared much about the chasuble. The sexton went and reversed the hour-glass and noted the hour. At eleven he put on the chasuble. The devil came and knocked. The sexton was afraid and asked who was there. The devil said that the sexton should come at once to the parson and attend the Sacrament. The sexton threw off the chasuble and ran out in haste, but found no one. Then the devil the second time demanded of the sexton to come out. The third time the devil came and said that the parson was awaiting him impatiently; he should come without delay. The sexton then went out, but by this time the hour was past, and the sexton had not on the chasuble. Then the sexton saw for the first time that it was the devil, and wished to hurry back to the house and get the chasuble. The devil, however, would not allow this, but said: No, my dear fellow, the time is past. He seized the sexton, broke his neck and threw him to the ground. Such occasions the devil seeks, and acts. So much for this Gospel.

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