

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday; Acts 2:1-13

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

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

1. The historical facts of this day, as well as the beautiful sermon the Holy Spirit delivered through the apostle Peter, which might appropriately be fully treated at this time, we shall leave for the special sermons on the various festivals of the year. For the present we will but briefly speak of the occasion of this festival, and of the office of the Holy Spirit.

2. The festival we call "Pentecost" had origin as follows: When God was about to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, he permitted them to celebrate the Feast of the Passover on the night of their departure; and commanded them on every annual recurrence of the season to observe the same feast in commemoration of their liberation from bondage and their departure from Egypt. Fifty days later, in their journey through the wilderness, they arrived at Mount Sinai. There God gave them the Law, through Moses; and there they were commanded to observe annually, in commemoration of that giving of the Law, the fiftieth day after the Feast of the Passover. Hence the name "Feast of Pentecost," the word "Pentecost" coming from the Greek "Pentecoste," or "fiftieth day." Our Saxons, rather more in conformity to the Greek, use the word "Pfungsten." So we have it here of Luke: "When the day of Pentecost was now come," or "fully come"--when the Jews had properly commemorated the giving of the Law of God on Mount Sinai--the Holy Spirit came, in accordance with Christ's promise, and gave them a new law. We now celebrate this feast, not because of the old historical event, but because of the new one--the sending of the Holy Spirit. It is in order, then, to give a little instruction concerning the difference between our Pentecost and that of the Jews.

LITERAL LAW AND SPIRITUAL LAW.

3. The occasion of the Jews' observance was the giving of the literal law; but it is ours to celebrate the giving of the spiritual law. To present the point more clearly, we cite Paul's distinction of the two covenants. 2 Cor 3, 6. And these two covenants respectively relate to two kinds of people.

4. First, there is the written law commanded of God and composed of written words. It is styled "written" or "literal" because it goes no farther and does not enter the heart, nor are there any resulting works other than hypocritical and extorted ones. Consisting only of letters--a written law--it is wholly dead. Its province being to kill, it ruled a dead people. With dead hearts men could not sincerely observe the commandments of God. Were every individual left to do as he pleased, being uninfluenced by fear, not one would be found choosing to be controlled by the Law. Unquestionably, human nature is conscious of the fact that while it prefers to follow its own inclinations it is impelled to do otherwise; for it reasons: "If I observe not God's commandments, he will punish me, casting me into hell." Thus our nature is conscious of obeying unwillingly and contrary to desire. Because of the punishment men fear, they soon become enemies to God; they feel themselves sinners, unable to stand before God, and consequently not acceptable to him. Indeed, they would rather there were no God. Such enmity to God remains persistently in the heart, however beautifully nature may adorn itself outwardly. We see, therefore, how the Law, so long as it consists merely of written words, can make no one righteous, can enter no heart. Upon this topic we have elsewhere preached and written at length.

5. The other law is spiritual; not written with ink and pen, nor uttered by lips as Moses read from the tables of stone. We learn from the historical record of the event that the Holy Spirit descended from heaven and filled all the assembled multitude, and they appeared with parting, fiery tongues and preached so unlike they were wont to do that all men were filled with amazement. The Spirit came pouring into their hearts, making them different beings, making them creatures who loved and willingly obeyed God. This change was simply the manifestation of the Spirit himself, his work in the heart. He wrote in those hearts his pure and fiery flame restoring them to life and causing them to respond with fiery tongues and efficient hands. They became new creatures, aware of possessing altogether different

minds and different tendencies. Then all was life and light; understanding, will and heart burned and delighted in whatever was acceptable to God. Such is the true distinction between the written law of God and the spiritual. Herein we perceive what is the work of the Holy Spirit.

THE OFFICE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

6. From this we should learn what is the office of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and how or by what means he is received in the heart and works there. In time past it was preached that he merely endorses what the councils conclude and the Pope establishes in the Spiritless papal Church. The fact is, however, the doings of Pope and councils are mere outward matters; they relate to external commands and government. The above theory is, therefore, wholly inconsistent and perverse. Of the work of the Holy Spirit, the Papists make a dead, written law, when it is really a living, spiritual law. Thus they render the Holy Spirit a Moses, and his words mere human prattle. It is all due to ignorance of the character of the Holy Spirit, of the purpose of his coming and the nature of his office. Therefore, let us learn and firmly grasp those things and be able rightly to distinguish the Spirit's office.

7. Observe here, the Holy Spirit descends and fills the hearts of the disciples sitting in fear and sorrow. He renders their tongues fiery and cloven, and inflames them with love unto boldness in preaching Christ--unto free and fearless utterance. Plainly, then, it is not the office of the Spirit to write books or to institute laws. He writes in the hearts of men, creating a new heart, so that man may rejoice before God, filled with love for him and ready, in consequence, to serve his fellows gladly.

8. What are the means and process the Spirit employs to change and renew the heart? It is through preaching Jesus Christ the Lord, as Christ himself says (Jo 15, 26): "When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall bear witness of me." As we have often heard, the Gospel is the message God would have preached world-wide, declaring to every individual that since no man can through the Law be made righteous, but must rather become more unrighteous, God sent his own beloved Son to shed his blood and die for our sins, from which sins we could not be released by our own effort.

9. It is not enough simply that Christ be preached; the Word must be believed. Therefore, God sends the Holy Spirit to impress the preaching upon the heart--to make it inhere and live therein. Unquestionably, Christ accomplished all--took away our sins and overcame every obstacle, enabling us to become, through him, lord\$ over all things. But the treasure lies in a heap; it is not everywhere distributed and applied. Before we can enjoy it, the Holy Spirit comes and communicates it to the heart, enabling us to believe and say, "I too, am one who shall have the blessing." To everyone who hears is grace offered through the Gospel; to grace is he called, as Christ says (Mt 11, 28), "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden," etc.

10. Now, with the belief that God has come to our rescue and given us this priceless blessing, inevitably the human heart must be filled with joy and with gratitude to God, and must exultingly cry: "Dear Father, since it is thy will to manifest toward me inexpressible love and fidelity, I will love thee sincerely, and willingly do what is pleasing to thee."

The believing heart never sees God with jealous eye. It does not fear being cast into hell as it did before the Holy Spirit came, when it was conscious of no love, no goodness, no faithfulness, on God's part, but only wrath and displeasure. But once let the Holy Spirit impress the heart with the fact of God's good will and graciousness towards it, and the resulting joy and confidence will impel it to do and suffer for God's sake whatever necessity demands.

11. Let us, then, learn to recognize the Holy Spirit--to know that his mission is to present to us the priceless Christ and all his blessings; to reveal them to us through the Gospel and apply them to the heart, making them ours. When our hearts are sensible of this work of the Spirit, naturally we are compelled to say: "If our works avail naught, and the Holy Spirit alone must accomplish our salvation, then why burden ourselves with works and laws?" By the doctrine of the Spirit, all human works and laws are excluded, even the laws of Moses. The Holy Spirit's instruction is superior to that of all books. The Spirit-taught individual understands the Scriptures better than does he who is occupied solely with the Law.

12. Hence, our only use for books is to strengthen our faith and to show others written testimony to the Spirit's teaching. For we may not keep our faith to ourselves, but must let it shine out; and to establish it the Scriptures are

necessary. Be careful, therefore, not to regard the Holy Spirit as a Law-maker, but as proclaiming to your heart the Gospel of Christ and setting you so free from the literal law that not a letter of it remains, except as a medium for preaching the Gospel.

BELIEVERS MUST YET RESIST SIN.

13. Here we should be intelligent and know that in one sense all is not accomplished when the Holy Spirit is received. The possessor of the Spirit is not at once entirely perfect, pure in all respects, no more sensible of the Law and of sin. We do not preach the doctrine that the Spirit's office is one of complete accomplishment, but rather that it is progressive; he operates continuously and increasingly. Hence, there is not to be found an individual perfect in righteousness and happiness, devoid of sin and sorrow, ever serving all men with pleasure. The Scriptures make plain the Holy Spirit's office--to liberate from sin and terror. But the work is not then complete. The Christian must, in some measure, still feel sin in his heart and experience the terrors of death; he is affected by whatever disturbs other sinners. While unbelievers are so deep in their sins as to be indifferent, believers are keenly conscious of theirs; but Christians are supported by the Holy Spirit, who consoles and strengthens till his work is fully accomplished. It is terminated when they no longer feel their sins.

14. So I say we must be prudent; we must take heed we do not arrogantly and presumptuously boast possession of the Holy Spirit, as do certain proud fanatics. The danger is in becoming too secure, in imagining ourselves perfect in all respects. The pious Christian is still flesh and blood like other men; he but strives to resist evil lusts and other sins, and is unwillingly sensible of evil desires. But he who is not a Christian is carelessly secure, wholly unconcerned about his sins.

15. It is of no significance that we feel evil lusts, provided we endeavor to resist them. One must not go by his feelings and consider himself lost if he have sinful desires. At the same time he must, so long as life lasts, contend with the sins he perceives in himself. He must unceasingly groan to be relieved of them, and must permit the Holy Spirit to operate in him. There is in believers continual groaning after holiness--groaning too deep for expression, as Paul says in Romans 8, 26. But Christians have a blessed listener--the Holy Spirit himself. He readily perceives sincere longing after purity, and sends the conscience divine comfort. There will ever be in us mingled purity and imperfection; we must be conscious both of the Holy Spirit's presence and of our own sins--our imperfections. We are like the sick man in the hands of the physician who is to restore him to health. Let no one think: "Here is a man who possesses the Holy Spirit; consequently he must be perfectly strong, having no imperfections and performing only worthy works." No, think not so; for so long as we live in the flesh here on earth, we cannot attain such a degree of perfection as to be wholly free from weakness and faults. The holy apostles themselves often lamented their temptations and sorrows. Their feelings concealed from them the Holy Spirit's presence, though they were aware of his strengthening and sustaining power in their temptations, a power conveyed through the Word and through faith.

16. The Holy Spirit is given only to the anxious and distressed heart. Only therein can the Gospel profit us and produce fruit. The gift is too sublime and noble for God to cast it before dogs and swine, who, when by chance they hear the preached message, devour it without knowing to what they do violence. The heart must recognize and feel its wretchedness and its inability to extricate itself. Before the Holy Spirit can come to the rescue, there must be a struggle in the heart. Let no one imagine he will receive the Spirit in any other way.

17. We see this truth illustrated in the narrative here. The beloved disciples were filled with fear and terror. They were disconsolate and discouraged, and sunk in unbelief and despair. Only with great difficulty and effort did Christ raise them again. Yet their only failing was their faintheartedness; they feared the heavens would fall upon them. Even the Lord himself could scarce comfort them until he said: "The Holy Spirit shall descend upon you from heaven, impressing myself upon your hearts until you shall know me and, through me, the Father. Then will your hearts be comforted, strengthened and filled with joy." And so was the promise fulfilled to them on this day of Pentecost.