

## Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter; John 16:5-15 A marvellous sermon on truly Christian prayer

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil; originally published in 1523.

1. The meaning of this Gospel lesson we have also often heard elsewhere; the only trouble is, the words have not generally been understood to have the meaning of things with which we are familiar. Therefore we will explain it a little, in order that one may see that the same teaching is contained in these words, that is found in all the other Gospel lessons. It is a fine Gospel, but it also requires fine students. We will omit the first part and consider what the Lord says, that the Holy Spirit is to convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment, and will see what the meaning of all this is.
2. In the first place, we see here that the world is accused of blindness and ignorance. All those who are without the Holy Spirit, however wise they may be in matters pertaining to the things of this world, are, before God, fools and blind. They do not like to hear this; and when they are told that their doings are of no account before God, it displeases them and makes them angry, because they insist that they are in possession of reason and the natural light, which God created in them. But what does this matter to us? There are the Scriptures and the Word of God plain and clear, that the Holy Spirit is to come to convict the world, because it does not know what sin, righteousness and judgment are. Thus it is determined, there it stands; let be angry who will, Christ does not care.
3. It is much to be deplored that the world is convicted, not only because of its sin and want of righteousness, not being able to judge rightly, but that it does not acknowledge nor see this, to say nothing of its endeavour to alter the matter. Oh, how completely the praise of all comes to naught, who, while they endeavour to make other people pious, know not themselves what sin is! Let us take, for example, at the present day, all the schools of learning and the learned men and see whether they can tell us what that one little word "sin" is? For who has ever heard that not to believe in Christ is sin? They say, it is sin if one speaks, desires or does something against God's will and commandment. But how does that correspond with this saying of Christ: It is sin because they do not believe on me? Therefore, they are easily convicted of the fact that they know not what sin is; and if they be ever so learned, they will not be able to explain this text.
4. In like manner, they are not able to know what "righteousness" is. For who has ever heard that a man should become pious and just because Christ ascended to heaven or goes to the Father and we see him no more? There we must say, a fool has thus spoken and not a wise man. For they say, righteousness is a virtue, which teaches man what he owes others. This is true, but the trouble is, they do not understand their own words, such blind fools they are. Therefore, one needs not be surprised that they rage so much against the Gospel and persecute the Christians. How could they do otherwise? They know no better.
5. Neither do they know what "judgment" or right is, that is, a right judgment, a correct good opinion and sense, or whatever you may call it. For they say: Right is that which is written in books, how one is to know and distinguish things, to quiet and end quarrels. But how does Christ define it? He says: "It is right, that the world is to be judged." Who understands such speech, and where will it go in or out, and how does it correspond with reason? Let us see whether we can explain it so that it may be understood.
6. In the first place one must know that the Word of God does not speak only of the outward existence and appearances, but it takes hold of the heart and the depths of the soul. Accordingly it does not judge man as to his outward appearance and action, but according to the depths of his conscience. Now, everyone will experience in himself, if he wishes to acknowledge it, however pious he may be (even though he were a Carthusian or as holy as any one on earth), that in his heart he would rather do the contrary, and otherwise than what he is outwardly compelled to do. Thus, if I were left to myself, a monk, who walks about in poverty and chastity, as they pride themselves, but were made to confess how I feel in my heart, I must say: That which I do, I would rather not do. If there were no hell and I would not feel the disgrace, I would leave my office have the misfortune, and run off. For I have no desire from the heart to do it, but am compelled thereto, and must do it in spite of hell, punishment or disgrace. It is not possible that I should do it from choice and gladly. Such everyone who is without grace finds in his own heart. The same you will find continually in other matters. I am never from my heart kind and friendly to my enemy, for this is impossible to nature; and though I act otherwise, in my heart I think thus: If it were not for the punishment, I would have my way and not remain

without revenge. Thus, I still go about before the world, and do not as I would like and feel inclined to do, for fear of punishment or disgrace. Likewise if you go through all the commandments, from the first to the last, you will find that there is no one who keeps God's commandments from the bottom of his heart.

7. Now, against this evil God found a remedy and determined to send Christ, his Son, into this world, that he should shed his blood and die, in order to make satisfaction for sin and take it away, and that the Holy Spirit then should enter the hearts of such people, who go about with the works of the Law, being unwilling and forced to it, and make them willing, in order that without force and with joyous heart they keep God's commandments. Otherwise there might be no means of removing the misery; for neither human reason and power, nor even an angel could rescue us from it. Thus, God has done away with the sins of all men who believe on the Christ, so that henceforth it is impossible for one to remain in sin who has this Saviour, who has taken all sins upon himself and blotted them out.

8. Inasmuch as Christ has now come and commanded to preach that everything we may do, however great and beautiful it may appear, is sin, because we do nothing that is good with pleasure and willingly, and that for this reason he has stepped forward and has taken away all sin, in order that we may receive the Holy Spirit, through whom we obtain love and pleasure to do what God wants us to do, in order that we do not attempt to come before God through our own works, but through Christ and his merits, therefore it cannot be called any longer sin committed against the Law, for the Law did nothing to assist us in becoming pious, since we are not able to do anything good.

9. What sort of sin then remains upon earth? No other than that one does not receive this Saviour and refuses to accept him who has taken away sin. For if he were present, there would be no sin, since he, as I have said, brings the Holy Spirit with him, who kindles the heart and makes it willing to do good. Therefore, the world is no longer punished and condemned on account of other sins, because Christ blots them all out; only this remains sin in the New Testament, that one will not acknowledge nor receive him. Therefore he likewise says in this Gospel: *"When the Holy Spirit is come, he will convict the world in respect of sin, because they believe not on me."*

10. As if he wished to say: Had they believed on me, everything would already have been forgiven them, whatever sin they might have committed, for I know that they by nature cannot do otherwise. But because they will not receive me, neither believe that I can help them, this it is that will condemn them. Therefore, God will at the final judgment pass a sentence like this on them: Behold, thou wast in sin and couldst not free thyself from it, still I did not on this account wish to condemn thee, for I sent my only begotten Son to thee and intended to give thee a Saviour, in order that he might take the sin from thee. Him thou didst not receive. Therefore, on this account alone, thou wilt be condemned, because thou hast not Christ.

11. This sentence, then, is given for the honour and glory of the high grace, which God has given us in Christ the Lord. What reason would have ever been so wise as to discover that this was done for man's sake? Reason is not able to rise higher in its thoughts than to say: I have sinned in deeds done. I must make good by doing other deeds. I must blot out and pay for the sin, in order that I may thus obtain a gracious God. If reason comes so far, it has reached its climax. Still it is nothing but foolishness and blindness.

12. But God speaks thus: If thou wilt be rid of sin, thou must do other works wherewith to pay the price. But with all the works which thou dost, thou canst do nothing but sin, even with the works wherewith thou thinkest to reconcile me and to do penance for thy sins. How wilt thou then, thou fool, blot out sin with sin? For even in the works which thou considerest the best and which thou canst do, thou sinnest if thou dost not do them willingly and from the heart. For if thou didst not fear punishment, thou wouldst rather not do them at all. Thus thou dost no more than that thou seekest to blot out little sins by doing greater ones; or else to commit such great ones that thou mayest lay aside others.

13. Wherefore, it is ever great blindness that a man does not see what sin is, nor know what good works are, but accepts sin for good works. When the Holy Spirit comes, he convicts the people and says: The works which thou hast done, as well as those which thou art still doing, are nothing but sin; therefore, it is all in vain that thou dost attempt to make satisfaction for thy sin according to thy ability. Then they feel compelled to say: Behold, this I did not know. Then says he: For this purpose I am here, in order to tell thee this. If thou hadst known it, it would not have been necessary for me to come and make it known. What wilt thou do now in order to be helped? This thou must do: Believe on the Saviour, the Lord Christ, that he has taken away thy sin. If thou believest this, he is thine and thy sins will disappear; if not, then thou wilt never get rid of sin, but wilt always fall into it deeper and deeper.

14. Thus, with this passage everything has been completely overthrown that has hitherto been preached about penance and satisfaction for sin, and all else that has been practiced and urged. For this reason there have been founded many orders and masses, and on this account we have become priests and monks and have run to and fro in order best in the world, which the world considers pious and holy, to get rid of sin. Therefore, it also follows: Whatever is that is nothing but mere sin and a

damnable thing. Thus we have considered one part of this Gospel.

15. The second thought then follows: "The Holy Spirit will convict the world in respect to righteousness, because I go to the Father," says Christ, "and ye behold me no more." Righteousness means piety and a good and honourable life before God. What is this now? It is, says Christ, "because I go to the Father." We have often said about the resurrection of Christ that it came to pass not for his sake, but for our sakes, in order that we may apply it to ourselves as a blessing which is our own. For this reason he is risen from the dead and has ascended to heaven, that he might begin a spiritual kingdom, in which he reigns in us through righteousness and truth. Therefore, he sits above; he does not rest and sleep, does not play with himself, but, as Paul says, Eph 1, 22, has his work here upon the earth, governing the consciences and the souls of men with the Gospel.

16. Wherever Christ is now preached and acknowledged, there he reigns in us, from the right hand of his Father, and is himself here below in the hearts of men. There he reigns with might, power and dominion over you and all your enemies, and guards you from sin, death, devil and hell. Thus is his resurrection and ascension our comfort, life, blessing, righteousness and everything in one. This is what the Lord means when he speaks of righteousness, that the people thereby should become pious and righteous, that he ascends to heaven to the Father and we see him no more. This the world does not know, therefore the Holy Spirit must come and convict the world of it.

17. How does this come to pass? Just as we have heard. Am I to become pious, it will not be enough for me to perform outwardly good works, but I must do them from the bottom of my heart, gladly and willingly, so that I may be free from the fear of sin, death and the devil; be joyous, and with a good conscience, and all confidence stand before him and know how I stand with him. This no work, no creature can give unto me, but Christ alone, who has ascended into heaven--there, where one cannot see him, but must believe that he sits yonder and wishes to help one. Such a faith makes me acceptable unto God; Christ gives me the Holy Spirit into my heart, who makes me willing and happy in the doing of every good work. In this manner I become righteous, and in no other; for the works themselves make me more and more unwilling, the longer I occupy myself with them.

18. But the longer one is engaged in this work, the more willing it makes one's heart; for wherever there is such knowledge, there the Holy Spirit cannot be wanting. When he comes, he makes the heart willing, joyful and happy, so that one may be free and willingly do what is pleasing to God, with joyous courage, and suffer whatever there is to suffer, yea, and even die willingly. And in proportion as this knowledge is clear and great, in that proportion the willingness and joy will also be great. Thus the commandment of God is fulfilled and everything done that one is to do, and thus thou art righteous. Who would ever have thought that this would be righteousness and that thus it should be. This question we have hitherto often heard about and considered, and although the words here be different, yet the sense and meaning are the same.

19. In the third place, the Holy Spirit is to convict the world in respect of judgment, that is that the world does not know what right is. For who has ever heard the definition of this right to be, because the prince of this world hath been judged? The prince of the world, to be sure is the devil, which one may readily see in his government.

20. If now I have learned to know what sin is and am free from it, and have obtained righteousness, so that now I stand in a new character and life and have become another man--have now the Lord Christ and know that something else than our works is required to get rid of sin--if these have come to pass in me, it then follows that I may have a correct judgment, having learned to judge differently before God. For, according to such understanding, I know how to discuss, conclude and judge of all things in heaven and upon earth, and to pass correct judgment; and when I have passed such a judgment, I can live accordingly. This no one else can do.

21. The world, in its holiness, maintains that righteousness means to perform good works wherewith to do penance for sin and reconcile God. This has been taught in all the schools of learning. Such teachers think it is right and well done if only they can accomplish good works. But now comes the Holy Spirit and says: Not so. You err and are mistaken. Your judgment is wrong. Therefore there must be another judgment. You should judge thus: Everything that your reason concludes, is erroneous and false, and you are a fool and a simpleton.

22. Reason may do other things; for instance, know how to judge in worldly and human matters and affairs, how to build cities and houses, how to govern well, and the like. In such matters one may easily be able to judge and decide more wisely than another. Of this, however, we do not speak here, but of judgment in the significance of what is right or wrong before God. Here the Holy Spirit concludes thus: Every judgment of reason is false and worth nothing. Everything that is born of man and is not born from above, must be rooted out and crucified, so that no one may boast of it and depend upon it. Again, whatever the world considers as wisdom, that which it votes as wisely and intelligently devised and accomplished, is foolishness before God. In short, whatever the world does, is useless and cursed, unless it proceeds from Christ, the Lord, and is of his Word and Spirit, as he teaches us. If it does not proceed from him, it is surely mere blindness and there is no good in it.

23. Therefore everything that the world considers good is debased. Everything is evil because it does not proceed from the Word and the Spirit, but from the old Adam, who is nothing more than a blind fool and sinner. And why? Should not your wisdom and reason be foolishness and count for nothing, since the most exalted one, who has all the power and wisdom of this world in the highest degree, is condemned? For, without doubt, there is no one in the world so wise, shrewd and rational as the devil, and no one is able to make a more pious appearance. And all wisdom and holiness that do not proceed from God, as well as the most beautiful things in the world, are found in their highest degree in the devil. Since he is a prince and the ruler of the world, the wisdom and righteousness of the world must proceed from him; here he reigns with all his power. Therefore, Christ says: Since the same prince of the world is condemned, with all that he has and can do, the world is ever blind because it considers that to be good which has been condemned already, namely his wisdom and piety.

24. We must, therefore, pass a correct judgment, such as Christ passes, if we are to guard against everything that the world considers and declares precious in order that it may appear before God prudent, wise and pious. If people who have not the Word and Spirit of Christ, desire to teach and govern, everything is already condemned; for in this way one accomplishes no more than to make the old Adam stronger and to establish him in his opinion that his works, his piety and prudence are to avail before God. Thereby one must work himself deeper and deeper into the devil's kingdom.

25. But now, since the prince of this world and the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the devil, are directly opposed to one another, and the Holy Spirit is not willing that anyone should parade his own deeds and praise himself on account of them, the holy cross must soon follow. The world will not consent to be reprimanded for its blindness. Therefore one must willingly submit and suffer persecution. If we have the right kind of faith in our hearts, we must also open our mouths and confess righteousness and make known sin. Likewise we must condemn and punish the doings of this world and make it known that everything it undertakes, is damned. For this we must be considered heretics, and must pass through the fire. They say: This is against the holy councils and the canon of the holy father, the pope. Then you are to answer: How can I help it? Here it stands--the text does not say the Holy Spirit is to convict them and say their doctrine is error, blindness and the government of the devil. This, of course, they will not endure, but would have us call them gracious noblemen. Therefore, one must here risk his neck.

26. These are the three parts we have in this Gospel lesson: Sin is unbelief; righteousness is faith; the judgment is the holy cross. Therefore give heed and learn to consider everything that is without the Spirit as nothing and as condemned, and afterwards be prepared for the holy cross that thou must suffer on account of it. Now follows in the Gospel further: *"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth."*

27. These words ought to be understood in all their simplicity, as if the Lord were to say: "These three parts which I have now related, you cannot yet fully understand, even though I were to explain them unto you. I would have to say much about them in order to explain them more fully, to make plain how things shall be, and you still stick too deep in your coarse, carnal reason to be able to comprehend it. Therefore, I will forbear now. When the Holy Spirit comes, he will enlighten your hearts, so that you will understand it, and will call to your remembrance all things, I tell you of it now, in order that you may think about it. Thus, we give these words in their simple meaning. It is as if I conversed with some one and said: I would yet have many things to say, but they are too difficult for you. You cannot yet comprehend and grasp them.

28. But our doctors and highly learned men have made use of these words in a frivolous way and said that it was necessary to have something more than the Gospel and the Scriptures; therefore one ought also to bear what the councils and the popes decree. They endeavour to prove in this way that Christ says here: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now;" therefore, because he has not told them all things, it must follow that he told them to the councils, popes and bishops, who are now to teach them.

29. Now look at these fools, what they say. Christ says: "I have yet many things to say unto you." What does "you" mean? To whom does he speak? Without doubt, to the apostles. To these he says: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all truth." Therefore, if Christ is not to lie, his Word must have been fulfilled at the time that the Holy Spirit came. The Holy Spirit must have said everything to them and accomplished everything that the Lord here refers to, and, of course, he led them into all the truth. How, then, do we get the idea that Christ should not have said everything, but should have kept much back, which the councils were to teach and to determine? With this idea his words do not at all harmonize. Christ gives to understand that soon the Holy Spirit would tell and explain to them all things, and that afterwards the apostles should carry out everything, and through them should be made known to the world what they have learned from the Holy Spirit. But, according to the councils and popes, it depends on what they say, teach and command, even to the end of the world.

30. Moreover, Christ says further: "He shall guide you into all the truth." Here we conclude: If what the councils teach be the

truth, that one is to wear the tonsure and the cap and live a life of celibacy, then the apostles never came to the truth, since none of them ever entered a cloister, nor kept any of those foolish laws. Thus, Christ must indeed have betrayed us in this, that he said the Holy Spirit should guide us into all the truth, when in reality he wished to teach how we were to become priests and monks and not to eat meat on certain days, and like foolish things.

31. Without doubt it is "truth" before God when one lives an upright and sincere life. But if we now look at our ecclesiasts, pope, bishops, priests and monks, we see nothing but carnival masks, who give themselves the outward appearance of being pious, but in their hearts they are villains. What popes, bishops, and orders have ever led us into this truth, which should spring from within--out of the heart? In everything they are concerned about the outward appearance of things, in order that they may make a display before the eyes of the people.

32. Thus they have perverted this text masterfully in order to strengthen their lies; and yet we are to call them gracious lords! To hear such things is exasperating and it should grieve our hearts that we are to suffer such great outrage--should see how shamefully the people act against the precious Word of God and that they make the Holy Spirit a liar. Should not this single passage be powerful enough against the pope and the councils, even if we had no other in the Scriptures?

33. Thirdly, Christ says: "You cannot bear them now." Here we ask: My dear, should it have been too hard for the apostles to understand or to obey such laws as abstaining from meat, and the like? They had been accustomed in the law of Moses to observe many such outward ceremonies, and had been educated therein all their life, so that it would have been child's play for them. Moreover, they understood this better than we do. Is it such a difficult matter-- that a monk must wear a black or gray cap, the pope three crowns, a bishop a pointed hat, or the manner of dedicating churches and altars and baptizing bells--are these so difficult as to make it necessary that the Holy Spirit should come from heaven to teach such things? If it is not acting the fool enough that one jests with these noble words, then I do not know how one may be a worse fool.

34. Therefore, beware of these liars and understand the words rightly, thus: Christ wishes to speak of the inward, actual character, not of outward jugglery. He wishes to make the heart, before the eyes of God, pious and righteous in order that it, in the first place, acknowledge its sin, and in the second place, that it acknowledge him to be the one who forgives sin and suffers himself to be sacrificed upon the cross. This is that "truth" which the apostles were not yet able to hear and understand. But those outward things make no one righteous, lead no one to the truth. They make only hypocrites and a show, by which the people are deceived.

35. Thus, we have the true meaning of this passage, from which we see how fools who seek from it to bolster up their jugglery, place themselves in opposition to it and build upon the sand. There is scarcely a passage that is more strongly opposed to them than this one. We have briefly explained this Gospel lesson in order that we may see how it teaches just that which we have always preached.

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