

Sermon for Pentecost Monday; John 3:16-21

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil, 1523

I. HOW CHRIST PRESENTS HIMSELF IN THIS SERMON AS MEDIATOR AND SAVIOUR.

1. This is another of the true Gospel lessons, such as John is accustomed to write; for he writes in a way to make him alone worthy the name of an evangelist. Now, as you have often heard, the Gospel teaches nothing but that one must learn to know Christ alone, and so the Holy Spirit teaches nothing more. Therefore, examine only the words themselves; they are weighty, precious and comforting beyond measure. First Christ says: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life."

2. Now, notice that Christ represents the Father to us as none else than the all-loving and magnetic one, and he brings us through himself to the Father. Everything Christ does tends to help us to acquire a loving confidence in the Father. To simply fear the Father confers no benefit; but to bear to him a companionable love of rare quality makes us blessed. Now, Christ says here, the Father so loved the world that he gave his beloved child for the world, and instituted for us a way to come to him; that way is Christ. I have often said that faith alone is not sufficient before God, but the price of redemption must also be in evidence. The Turk and Jew, too, believe in God, but without means and mediator.

3. What is now the cost of redemption? Today's Gospel points this out. The Holy Spirit teaches everywhere that we do not possess the Father except through a mediator, and he will not allow us to approach the Father without one. Now, the schools teach us to approach the Father without a mediator, through our own good works. That means to reject Christ as a mediator, as Jeremiah tells us did the godless, who thought and said: Let us send wood to him as his food, and we will root him out of the land, and there will be no remembrance of his name. But their plans did not result as they intended they should. Therefore, let us never join them. It would be at the peril of our lives, for we should be despising the priceless sacrifice which the Father made for us. But let us thank the Father for ordering it as he has, and placing between us one who is God and equal with God, and also man, on a level with man; for we are human and he is God. Where God and man oppose each other, man meets with instant destruction, for he cannot stand against God. God has intervened by placing as mediator one who is alike true God and true man. Through him we are to come to the Father; with the price we can pay nothing is accomplished.

4. Now, the schools teach that man is to be saved by his own works; they say: Whosoever becomes a monk or nun, or repeats every day the little prayer of St. Bridget, shall be eternally saved; and all the books are full of like teachings. This is no less than saying: I will work enough to escape perdition; I will turn my sins into vapor, to disappear and open a way into heaven. They wish to discover the sacrifice or price of salvation in themselves and to ignore Christ as mediator. But they must perish, since they fain would come to the Father without a mediator, without Christ, whom the Father holds up before us out of his gracious goodness. Christ teaches here that we are not lost, but have eternal life; that is, that God has so loved us that he allowed the ransom to cost him his only beloved child. Him he placed in our stead to suffer misery, hell and death, and let him drink our cup to the dregs. This is the way we are to be saved.

5. Now, if there were another way to heaven doubtless he would have made it known to us. There is no other. Therefore, let us cling to the words, firmly pilot our hearts along this way and keep within it, and let us close our eyes and say: If I had the merits of all the saints, the sanctity and purity of all virgins, and the piety of St. Peter besides, still I would not give a fig for all I call my own. I must have another foundation on which to build, namely, the words: God has given his Son, that whosoever believeth on him, whom the Father sent out of love, shall be saved. And let us defiantly boast that we must be sustained. Let us fearlessly establish ourselves upon his words, which neither Satan, hell nor death can overthrow, for the Father mightily writes his Word over these terrors and all that clings to them. Come what will, let us say: Here is God's Word; that is my rock and anchor; to that I cling and that abides; and where that abides, there I abide also. For God cannot lie; sooner would the heavens and earth perish than the smallest letter or tittle of his Word would fail.

6. Notice carefully now that man must have a mediator, and that mediator is Christ. Ascend upon him to the Father, and say: Although I cannot exist before thy majesty nor that of any angel - all must shake and tremble - yet I have here one, Christ, whom thou canst not fail to regard. I am under his protection and rely upon thy Word that thou wilt receive me through him. Thou wilt not reject me, for thou must reject him before thou dost reject me. In this way one must come to the Father through Christ, thereby gaining a beautiful and loving refuge in him.

7. This lifts up and cheers a timid, despairing conscience and gives it peace. Aside from God's Word nothing helps, neither cowls nor tonsures, neither the priesthood nor monkery. No human work, be it called ever so holy, is able to silence God's judgment and give peace to our hearts. God has, out of love, given us his Son, through whom we shall be saved; therefore, let no one make another way than this. Guard yourself against adding to it, for so you would but render it valueless. He who adds to it, leads from the right road upon a branch road that goes into the wilderness. Hence, let not your conscience trust in any work, in any merit of saints, but alone in the Word of God. That will not lie to you, but its promise will be sufficient. Then you will lay hold upon God with his own words; upon them you can build; to them you can anchor your heart and confidence. Now follows, further, in this Gospel: "For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through him."

8. With these words one can apprehend God as he is to be apprehended. You do not seek him; rather he seeks you, and pictures his Son before you as a Saviour and not as a judge. Thus there is developed for you a refuge in the Father.

9. It is a common practice to represent the gracious Saviour as a judge, and from this practice has sprung a dependence upon the merits of saints, causing us to turn away from Christ and take refuge in the saint; We fancy that the saints are more gracious and more kindly disposed to us than even God himself. Therefore, one says, St. Peter is my apostle; another says, St. Paul is my patron; and so on with St. Barbara, St. Erasmus and others. But God cannot permit this; the glory must belong to him. My conscience must rest upon the foundation, the eternal, all-knowing truth, else it is a failure. Now, God alone is the truth, and the conscience must rest upon him and nothing else.

10. If I picture Christ as only a judge, I shall fear him. The result will be that soon I am constrained before him, grow afraid of him and then hate him, and my heart becomes corrupt and blasphemous. But when I know him as the Gospel pictures him, and long for him as the best friend that my heart can choose, then it is well; love soon follows. No friend can do as much for us as he has. I forget father and mother and love him; then I have a strong confidence in him. But if one simply fears him, then that one falls back on his good works and makes no recognition of Christ as mediator, thinking to run into the presence of God without him. In this way he works his own ruin. It is with him as the psalmist says of the fools and godless, Ps 53, 5: "There were they in great fear, where no fear was." And in Prov 28, 1 Solomon says: "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." For their stubborn hearts are afraid before Christ, though he is still their best friend, and they run when no one pursues, solely because of their stubborn and false conception of Christ.

11. Then learn from this lesson to know Christ aright and to hold him between yourself and the Father; let him alone be the sacrifice which shall secure heaven and salvation. Oh, when this passage comes to mind in the hour of death, when the test comes, what comfort to meditate on its message - how the Lord came not to condemn the world, but to save it. He who believes, cannot be lost, but will be saved, since it is true that naught accomplishes our salvation except Christ alone, who came to be our Saviour. Then believe on him. In the words we are studying, he calls everybody, and even threatens as well as calls, concluding thus: "He that believeth on him is not judged: he that believeth not hath been judged already, because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God."

II. THE JUDGMENT CHRIST PASSES UPON THE WORLD AND BELIEVERS.

12. When the learned schools would make people godly, they hold before them the judgment, making it as hot as they possibly can; in this way they lead men into terror, where they abandon them, never pointing out a way of escape. Here Christ also presents the judgment and threatens men, but at the same time he tells them how they may flee from wrath. This is his teaching: There will be a judgment, which no one can escape except those who believe without any ifs or ands. If you add anything thereto, you have entered upon the byway into the woods and are lost; for he that believeth not, is lost already. I am the only door that opens into heaven. The way is narrow; you must become small if you wish to pass through the rock. Those who are decorated with good works, like a work-righteous person with shells, can never force their way through. They must divest themselves and become small. One can meet the

conditions only when he despairs of himself. If you come hampered with great burdens of good works, you will never be able to forge a way into heaven; you must lay them aside before you can enter.

13. From this it follows that where faith is, there sin does no harm; for faith makes us Christ's. But where faith is not, there is either fear and hatred of God, or a profligate, sinful life. We met with this same truth when we learned that the Holy Spirit will convict the world in respect of sin because, as Christ says, they believed not on him. The only sin is unbelief. Faith roots out all sins. Unbelief is the only reason why man does not know God. Because of it he is in fear in the presence of God. When a man is in fear, he hates and blasphemes God, heaping up his sins and keeping none of the commandments. Now, Christ gives a reason for this judgment; he says: "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil."

14. The light is Christ the Lord, manifest in the knowledge of him, as he is here pictured in this Gospel. As a glance into the sun, we may look into this Gospel and see what God is. This light is come into the world through the preaching of the apostles and has shone through the whole world. Man is its enemy only because of his evil works; the whole world is fast therein. Why do not the pope and bishops, the priests and monks, permit their deeds to be exposed and their manner of life brought to light? For the reason that their works are evil. Now, the light reveals to us that all our works amount to nothing and we must have Christ alone. When we apply the test of that light, they say: Nay, should I have fasted and prayed so long for nothing? Get out, you heretics! If men no longer believed in the efficacy of works, no one would attend vigils and the mass; then the monks' kitchens would become small and their cellars empty. Since they cannot tolerate such a possibility, they must hate the light.

15. God has blinded them so that they build on stone and wood, overlooking the foundation of truth and failing to build upon Christ. The Gospel aims, however, to establish the heart upon the eternal foundation truth. Now, if one would overthrow their manner of building, the light must be brought and their works be made manifest, that they may be put to shame. They will never tolerate such inspection, however, but must protect their doings, with the consequence that they become enemies to this light. That is just what the Lord says: "For every one that doeth evil, hateth the light, and cometh not to the light, lest their works should be reprov'd."

16. They hate the light, says Christ; because they do evil; they lead a shameful life, at the same time believing it to be a godly life. The devil, also, would be a fine fellow. He is anxious to sit in a clean place, and not lie before the door; he would come within the heart, but never to the light; he would wear the cloak of respectability, so that his injustice be not seen. Now, let us take the light of day as an illustration. The sun will not refuse to rise because I am lazy and would gladly sleep an hour or two longer. No, it goes forth in its course and does not hide its light, although it is not agreeable to me. Likewise will the Sun of righteousness arise; the evil-doers are unwilling to come into the light, but they cover and guard their sins and evil deeds. Thereby they merit the judgment; for they have not only done wickedly, but they wish to defend their action, which is a double sin.

17. But the righteous gladly approach the light, willing that all may pass judgment upon their works, and they even let the devil examine them. They have cultivated in good soil, because they possess faith, and they go forth in their faith to help the poor. These works are wrought in them by God, hence they cannot be evil. Thus a righteous person gladly permits all the world to act as judge upon his works. It is a beautiful thing when a believer, finding his work is rejected, says: Yes, there is no good at all in the works of my own doing, but the works that are wrought in me by Christ, my Lord, they are good. He desires no honour, but will ascribe all honour to God; will possess all in God that he should possess, and can, with a good conscience, go to the light and not be put to shame. That is what Christ means in his closing words: "But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his works may be made manifest, that they have been wrought in God."

18. Now we have heard what our consolation and our final and only refuge is, upon which we should lay our foundation and build. No person who professes to be a Christian dare undertake to do any work, imagining thereby to be saved; he is not saved except through Christ alone, whom it cost his all. We must come to salvation through him and his work, with nothing else added to it. If we build upon human works, we are reckoning directly against God's grace.

19. On the other hand, we must not abandon works, saying as do the impudent: Aye, then I will do good works no longer in order to be saved. True, you dare do nothing with the intent of its being meritorious for salvation, for the forgiveness of sin and for the pacifying of the conscience; you have sufficient for these in your faith. But your

neighbour has not sufficient; you must extend a helping hand to him. That you may perform such service, God permits you to live; if not so, your execution would soon be called for. You live for the purpose of serving by your life, not yourself, but your neighbour.

20. Christ the Lord had also sufficient; what the world had was his. He might have passed us by, but it is not the nature of true life to do so. Nay, cursed be that life into perdition that lives for self; for to so live is heathenish and not Christian. Then those who have at present their sufficiency from Christ, must follow the example of Christ and with utter sincerity do good to their neighbours, as Christ did to us; freely, without the least thought of obtaining anything thereby, only with the desire that it be pleasing to God.

21. We Christians are like a child born in the father's house. It brings the title to the inheritance with it, in its flesh and blood; the title to the heritage belongs to it by virtue of its birth. A servant, however, acquires his merit, not in the family, but outside of it. When the child of the house is grown, it must, nevertheless, help to increase and improve the inheritance, making It more valuable; but it does not, first of all, gain the inheritance by works, for that is acquired already by virtue of its birth. Just so, if we believe on God, then we are already heirs and need not to acquire inheritance by our works; yet we must be co-labourers with the Father to increase it. Paul speaks in like manner to the Philippians: "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." Phil 2, 5ff. That is: Lead such an outward life that it may be like the example of Christ, and help your neighbour with your life and property, thinking not of winning the birthright by your works. Guard your Sonship, not by your own foolhardiness, but by faith, and be a co-labourer in extending the kingdom.

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