

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Trinity; Luke 14:16-24 [THE GREAT SUPPER]

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

1. Here in this Gospel lesson, as everywhere in the Scriptures, we are to be careful that we grasp, as well as we can, the true, simple meaning, as we have often heard, and establish our hearts and consciences in that meaning. For whoever will contend with Satan, dare not waver and sway hither and thither, but must be convinced of his cause and be armed with clear sure written documents, for if the devil gets him on his fork through his unsettled notions, he will then toss him here and there as the wind does the dry leaf.
2. Therefore we must here in this Gospel grasp its true meaning, in which we may be able to stand. It is not to be understood as referring to the holy Sacrament or the bread of the altar, to which the Papists have pulled it as it were by the hair on holy Corpus Christi day, along with many other passages of Scripture, which have not in a single letter any reference or very little to that Sacrament. But the meaning and substance of this text is, that while the Gospel is preached and published in all the world, few people accept it. And it is here called a supper or an evening meal, because the Gospel shall be the last word or doctrine that will usher in the end of the world.
3. Therefore this supper is nothing else than a rich, expensive meal, which God has provided in Christ through the Gospel, in which he spreads before us great possessions and rich treasures.
4. This invitation, however, took place thus, as the text says: The Lord sent out his servant to invite the guests to this costly supper, that is, the Apostles were all sent forth with one and the same word into all the world, to bid and call to this supper with one voice and with one Gospel, or with one message. Thus, when St. Peter arrived at and preached in a place where St. Paul had preached before, it was the same teaching which the one preached as the other, and the hearers also could say: Behold, he preaches just like we heard before from the first one; they agree and are one and the same. In order to show this unity, the Evangelist says: "And he sent forth his servant," and says not, his servants, as if he spake of many servants. But the message, the servant should execute and with which he should gain recruits, was: "Come; for all things are now ready."
5. For Christ had been crucified, had destroyed sin and death by his death, had risen from the dead, the Holy Spirit had been given, and in short, all things pertaining to this supper were now ready. It all was so prepared that it did not cost us anything; for the Father through Christ bore all its expenses, in order that we without our merit and assistance might enjoy his treasures, and become rich and prosperous.
6. At that time he sent his servant first among the Jews, to invite them to the supper, who had the promises and oracles of God; for the Law and all the prophets were framed to the end that they should prepare a people for God, as the angel Gabriel said of John the Baptist to his father Zacharias: "He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn unto the Lord their God. And he shall go before his face in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the just; to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him," Luke 1:15-17. But what do the guests say to the message of the servant? The text tells us: "And they all with one consent began to make excuse."

7. That is what the Lord in Mat. 10:37-38 says: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that doth not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me." Now observe how few there are who are thus experts in leaving all for Christ. For whoever will come to this supper, must esteem the Gospel above everything, body and riches, wife and child, friend and foe; yea, he must forsake everything that separates him from the Gospel, let it be as good, right and holy as it ever can be.

8. Do not think that these men who excuse themselves here were engaged in public, coarse sins, and in unrighteous employment and business. No. They were occupied in a laudable, good employment. For it is never wrong that we buy and transact business, that we honestly support ourselves, or take a wife and live in the married state. But the reason we should not come into the state of these persons, is that they were unwilling to leave these things, but hung to them with all their hearts. Now we must be willing to leave them, if the Gospel require it.

9. Should you then say: I would gladly follow and cleave to the Gospel, and cheerfully also do all things besides; but shall I leave my land, my home and servants, my wife and child, that is hard? Has not God commanded that I should labour to support my wife and child? Observe, therefore, this is also the sum of it all; the Gospel is the Word of the cross and the word of offence, so that everyone is easily offended by it. Yes, God commanded you to do this, he commanded you besides to honour and love him above all creatures, and esteem him higher than all things you may know, as the first and greatest commandment teaches: "Thou shalt love Jehovah thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." Deut. 6:5; Mat. 22:37. Therefore you must let all things go rather than let them separate you from his love and his Word.

10. However, he loses nothing, who forsakes anything for the Gospel's sake. Do you lose for its sake your temporal life, God will indeed give you another and a better, an eternal life; as Christ in Mat. 10:39 says: "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." Must you leave your wife and child; remember, God cares for you, he will give them a much better father than you are; and if you only believe it will certainly come to pass. For you have such great pledges and rich promises and admonitions, that he will not let his Word fail; but will maintain it, if we only heartily trust in and yield to it. As he said in Mat. 19:29: "Every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life."

Here stand his very word and promise, what wish we further? Or what do we desire that is greater? Ay, where then is the trouble? Only in our faith. Therefore no one comes to this supper, unless he brings with him a true faith, which God honours and loves above all creatures. But what does the Lord do, who lets the guests be invited, and who thus excused themselves? The text says: "Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in hither the poor, and maimed, and blind, and lame."

11. To go out into the streets and lanes means nothing but that the Jews made themselves unworthy of the Gospel, to turn from them and for the disciples turn to the heathen. For Christ commanded his disciples before his resurrection that they should not go into any way of the Gentiles nor preach in any city of the Samaritans; but go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and feed them, Mat. 10:5-6, as they did. But since the Jews after the resurrection of Jesus Christ resisted his Word and would not accept it, then the disciples spake to them as we have an example in Acts 13:46-47: "It was necessary that the Word of God should first be spoken to you. Seeing ye thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee for a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the uttermost part of the earth." Is. 49:6. But what does it mean when he says to the servant: "Go out into the highways and hedges, and constrain them to come in,

that my house may be filled."

12. This is to be understood as referring to those of a dispirited, timid conscience, who also belong among the guests of this supper, they will be constrained to come in. However it is not an outward but an inward and spiritual constraining, and takes place in this way: When the Law is preached and sin is unfolded or made manifest, that man comes to a knowledge of himself, so that compelling and constraining them to come in means, to force anew the sins into the conscience, that thereby man may acknowledge, that he is nothing, that all his works are sinful and damnable, and thus quickly receives a despairing conscience and a bashful and terrified heart, in which every refuge and help are taken from him and everywhere he is unable to find any comfort in them and finally despairs of all help in himself.

13. When this now takes place, it is called "constraining," for you should not delay his "coming in," but help him out of his state of despair. But this takes place, when you comfort him with the Gospel and tell him how he may be delivered from his sin, and say to him: Believe in Christ, that he has freed you from sin, then your sins are forgiven you. That is what "constrain them to come in" (compelle intrare) means; and it does not mean outward compelling as they explain it, so that they drive rogues and wicked persons, as it were with police force, to this supper; for that accomplishes nothing, and it is not the sense of the Gospel. Therefore do the constraining energetically in the conscience only, and let it be an inner and spiritual constraining. And the Lord says further to the servant and to others:

"For I say unto you that none of those men that were bidden shalt taste of my supper."

14. These words are the conclusion and summary of this Gospel lesson, that those, who are the most certain and wish to taste of this supper, shall not taste of it. The reason you have heard. Therefore in brief, the guests, who are here invited and came not, are those who imagine they could obtain the supper through their own works, they greatly exert themselves and are sure of their cause, they wish to taste of the supper. But the Lord concludes with powerful words and says: "That none of those men that were bidden shall taste of my supper." Why then, dear Lord? They have done nothing bad and neither have they been occupied with false teachings. Why, the reason is that they have denied the faith, and did not publicly confess it before everybody, and did not esteem this rich and expensive supper above all creatures, For since it is costly and precious, it therefore also requires something from the people who esteem it so, and it puts them under some, obligation, be it what it may. See, that is the sense of this Gospel text briefly considered. Whoever desires to develop it further may do so.

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