

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity; Luke 15:1-10

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

PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP.

1. The words of the Gospel are living and quickening, if we only comprehend them aright. But, in order that we may learn to understand this Gospel better, we will now place before us two classes of men, namely, public sinners and Pharisees, and will make Christ their judge. You have often heard that it is our duty, for love's sake, to serve our neighbour in all things. If he is poor, we are to serve him with our goods; if he is in disgrace, we are to cover him with the mantle of our honour; if he is a sinner, we are to adorn him with our righteousness and piety. That is what Christ did for us. Phil. 2. He who was so exceedingly rich did, for our sake, empty himself and become poor. He served us with his goods, that we in our poverty might become rich. He was made to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

2. Now, the outward works of love are very great, as when we place our goods in the service of another. But the greatest is this, that I surrender my own righteousness and make it serve for the sins of my neighbour. For, outwardly to render service and help by means of one's goods is love only in its outward aspect; but to render help and service through one's righteousness, that is something great and pertains to the inward man. This means that I must love the sinner and be his friend, must be hostile to his vices and earnestly rebuke them, yet that I must love him with all my heart so as to cover his sins with my righteousness. I am commanded to rebuke; but Christ tells me, in Mat. 18:15-18, how I am to do this: "If thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone; if he hear thee, then hast thou gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church; and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican. Verily I say unto you, what things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

3. In short, such an enemy of my neighbour am I to be that I cannot let him suffer. So dearly must I love him that I shall even run after him, and shall become like the shepherd that seeks the lost sheep, like the woman that seeks the lost piece of silver. On this occasion, therefore, we shall speak concerning such great work of love as is shown when a pious man invests the sinner with his own righteousness, when a pious woman invests the most wanton harlot with her own honour.

4. This is something that neither the world nor reason will do. A work like this cannot be done by honourable and pious men who are actuated only by reason, by men who would prove their piety by turning up their nose at those who are sinners, as here the Pharisees do who murmur and grumble at public sinners.

5. This is what our monks do. They have gone about making faces at all who lie in their sins, and have thought: "Oh, but this is a worldly fellow! He does not concern us. If, now, he really would be pious, let him put on the monk's cowl." Hence it is that reason and such hypocrites cannot refrain from despising those who are not like them. They are puffed up over their own life and conduct, and cannot advance far enough to be merciful to sinners. This much they do not know, that they are to be servants, and that their piety is to be of service to others. Moreover, they become so proud and harsh that they are unable to manifest any love. They think: "This peasant is not worthy to unloose the latchet of my shoes; therefore do not say that I am to

show him any affection." But at this point God intervenes, permitting the proud one to receive a severe fall and shock that he often becomes guilty of such sins as adultery, and at times does things even worse, and must afterwards smite himself, saying: "Keep still, brother, and restrain yourself, you are of precisely the same stuff as yonder peasant." He thereby acknowledges that we are all chips of the same block. "No ass need deride another as a beast of burden; for we are all of one flesh.

6. This we clearly see in the two sorts of people here presented to us as examples. In the first place, we have the Pharisees and hypocrites who are exceedingly pious people, and were over head and ears in holiness. In the second place, we have the open sinners and publicans, who were over head and ears in sins. These, therefore, were despised by those shining saints, and were not considered worthy of their society. Here, however, Christ intervenes with his judgment and says that those saints are to stoop down and take the sinners upon their shoulders, and are to bear in mind that, with their righteousness and piety, they are help to others out of their sins. But, no! That they will not do. And this is indeed the way it goes.

7. A truly Christian work is it that we descend and get so mixed up in the mire of the sinner as deeply as he sticks there himself, taking his sin upon ourselves and floundering out of it with him, not acting otherwise than as if his sin were our own. We should rebuke and deal with him in earnest; yet we are not to despise but sincerely to love him. If you are proud toward the sinner and despise him, you are utterly damned.

8. These, then, are great and good works in which we should exercise ourselves. But no man pays attention to them. Such works have entirely faded away and become extinct. In the meantime, one resorts, in the name of the devil, to Saint James, another proceeds to build a church, a third provides for the saying of masses,—this one does this, the other does that, and no one thinks of praying for the sinner. It is therefore to be feared that the holiest are in the deepest hell, and that the sinners are mostly in heaven. But it would be a truly Christian work, if you received sinners, if you entered into your closet and there said, in earnest prayer to the Lord: "Oh, my God! of such a person I hear so and so, he lieth in his sins, he hath fallen. Oh, Lord, help him to rise again," etc. This is just the way in which to receive and serve the sinner.

9. Moses acted thus when the Israelites worshipped the moulten calf. He mingled freely with the people in their sins. Yet he punished them severely, and caused three thousand men to be slain from gate to gate. Ex. 32. After that he went up and bowed down before God, and prayed that he would forgive the people their sin, or blot him out of the Book of Life. Behold, here we have a man who knew that God loved him and had written his name in the book of the blessed; and yet he says: "Lord, I would rather that thou shouldest damn me and save the people."

10. Paul, too, acted thus. At times he rebuked the Jews severely, calling them dogs and other names. Yet he knelt down and said: "I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake." Rom. 9:3. It is as if he had said: "I would willingly be anathema, if only the mass of the people might be helped." Such a course as this is much too lofty for reason, and passes beyond its conception. It is thus that we, too, must act, and thus that we must serve our neighbour.

11. Again, we have an incident in the first Book of Samuel. When the people demanded a king, and would not be ruled by God's Word alone, but lost faith in the Lord, and said that they wanted a temporal king to go out before them and fight their battles, like all the nations, 1 Sam. 8:20. Then God came and punished them for the sin of having despised him, and spoke thus to the prophet Samuel: "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me." After that the people came to Samuel and besought him to pray for them, saying: "Pray for thy servants unto Jehovah thy God, that we die not; for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask a king." Then Samuel, among other things, said unto them: "Far be it from me that I should sin against Jehovah in ceasing to pray for you; but I will instruct you in the good and right way. Only fear Jehovah, and

serve him in truth with all your heart, for consider how great things he hath done for you." 1 Sam. 12:19-24.

12. David also acted thus. When the Lord inflicted the plagues upon Israel he spake unto the Lord and said: "Lo, I have sinned, and I have done perversely; but these sheep, what have they done? Let thy hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house."

13. Such should be your bearing toward sinners; inwardly the heart in service, outwardly the tongue in earnest. God requires this of us; and this is what Christ, our Captain, has manifested in himself, as Paul says to the Philippians, 2:4-9: "Not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others. 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 likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, yea, the death of the cross."

14. Christ was filled with all righteousness, and might justly have condemned us all as sinners. But he did not do so. What did he do, then? He gave himself to be our Servant. His righteousness has served for our sins, his fulness for our feebleness, his life for our death. This we find illustrated, for our example, in the Gospel before us, where he bears himself with such friendliness toward sinners that the Pharisees murmur. The Lord therefore sets before them the following parables in order to teach how they are to receive sinners and be of service to them, saying: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, and having lost one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it, etc. Or what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a lamp, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it?"

15. Christ is both the shepherd and the woman; for he has lighted the lamp, that is, the Gospel, and he goes about in the desert, that is, the world. He sweeps the house, and seeks the lost sheep and lost piece of silver, when he comes with his Word and proclaims to us, first our sins, and then his grace and mercy. Christ's declaration, that he is the shepherd and has laid our sins upon his back or shoulders, makes us trust in him fully, and makes publicans and other sinners run after him. These would not have come unto him thus, had they regarded him as a hard and wrathful judge; for they had previously acknowledged themselves to be sinners and in need of his grace. And so they were drawn to him when they heard his loving doctrine. Here comes the sheep out of the wilderness, and here the lost piece of silver is found.

16. Learn from this, then, that our neighbour is to be sought as a lost sheep, that his shame is to be covered with our honour, that our piety is to be a cover for his sins. But nowadays, when men come together they backbite one another; and thus they would show how zealous they are against sin. Therefore, ye men, whenever ye come together, do not backbite your neighbours. Make not one face at one person and another at some one else. Do not cut off one man's foot and another man's hand; make no such traffic of living flesh. Likewise, ye women, when you come together, conceal the shame of others, and do not cause wounds which you cannot heal. Should you meet with anything like this in some one's house, then throw your mantle over shame and wounds, and close the door. A very good reason for doing this is, that you would have others do, the same to you. Then, if you have kept the matter secret, bring the parties before you afterwards, and read them a good lecture; and let it remain with you as a secret.

17. Christ, too, acts thus. He keeps silent and covers our sins. He could, indeed, expose us to shame, and could tread us under foot, as our text shows that the Pharisees did. But he does not do so. All will be brought to light, however, at the final judgment. Then everything hidden must be revealed. Then the virgin must place her crown upon the harlot, the pious woman must throw her veil over the adulteress, and everything we have must serve as a garment to cover the sins of others. For every man shall have his sheep, and every woman shall have her piece of silver. All our gifts must be the gifts of others.

18. Hence there is, in God's judgment, no greater sin on earth than that pious men and women and virgins commit when they despise those who lie in their sin and would appropriate to themselves their natural gifts, puffing themselves up and despising their neighbour.

19. Hence this Gospel is very comforting to sinners. But whilst it is friendly to sinners, it is a source of great fear to Pharisees. Had this Gospel been nothing more than a good counsel, it would not have been so comforting; but now that it has been commanded I can recognize the mind of God in Christ, since he will have it so, and enjoins that we are to cover the sins of others. Yea, what is still more, Christ himself does this, and to this end was he sent; for no man fulfills the law of God as perfectly as he. We are scarcely a spark amid the divine fire and light. He is the fire of which heaven and earth are full.

20. The Gospel is spoken to those only who acknowledge their sins, and their sins they acknowledge when they repent of them. But this Gospel is of no use to the Pharisees, for they do not acknowledge their sins. To those, however, who do acknowledge them, and are about to despair, the Gospel must be brought. But at this point the devil sets tip a game, and suggests to the consciences of those who acknowledge their sins and long to be freed from them, that this one should resort to Saint James, that one to Rome, this one should take refuge in prayers, the other in confession. And then they are told: "Give six pounds of wax, have so many masses said, do this, do that, and thus you will be freed from your sins." Thereby they are led farther and farther from the Gospel, and are brought to the standpoint of works. In this way they must certainly despair at last.

21. Therefore, when you feel your sins gnawing at you, and feel your heart trembling and agitated, place yourself beside the publicans where they are standing. These are the very ones who shall receive the Gospel. Do so joyously, and say: "Oh, God! it is thy word that says there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, who need no repentance, and that all the righteous and angels are to interpose and cover up sins. Now, Oh, God! I have come to this that I feel my sins. I am already judged. I need but the one Shepherd who seeketh me; and I will therefore freely venture on thy Gospel."

22. It is thus that you come to God. You are already the sheep placed upon his Shoulders. You have found the Shepherd. You are the piece of silver in the hand. You are the one over whom is joy in heaven in the presence of all the angels. We are not to worry, if we do not experience or feel this at once. Sin will daily decrease, and its sting will drive you to seek God. You must struggle against this feeling by faith, and say: "Oh, God! I know thou hast said this, and I lean upon thy Word. I am the sheep and the piece of silver; thou the shepherd and the woman."

23. You might say: Yes, this I will gladly do; but I cannot atone for my sins. I can render no satisfaction for them. Consider then the publicans and sinners. What good have they done? None. They came to God, heard his Word and believed it. Do the same. His are living words. The Gospel is too deep to be fathomed by human words. Conscientious men who tried it readily understand this.

24. The learned and idle may determine the meaning of the ninety nine in the desert. It is enough for us to learn the main thought of this Gospel.