

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter; John 16:5-15 [second sermon]

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

I. THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVICTS THE WORLD OF SIN.

1. Christ pictures to us in this Gospel what his kingdom is and what takes place in it, how it is governed and what it accomplishes. Here you learn that there is a kingdom upon the earth and that it is invisible, and that it cleaves to and rests upon the Word of God alone. Christ does not say that he wishes his disciples to follow him up into heaven at once; but that he will send them the Holy Spirit and that he departs from them for the very purpose of sending them the Holy Spirit, in order that thereby his kingdom may be further developed. Therefore, he says: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." They could not understand that kingdom, how it should exist and be administered. Their reason and senses were still too carnal, they had never seen a spiritual kingdom, nor heard of one; therefore they continually thought of a temporal, outward kingdom. And here as in other Gospels, faith and trust in Christ are preached. We wish now to consider the leading thoughts in this Gospel and to explain them as far as God gives us his grace to do so. The Lord addresses his disciples thus: "When the Comforter is come, he will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment; of sin, because they believe not on me."

2. Here we must let that be "sin" which is ascribed to, and included in, sin by the high majesty of heaven. In the text only unbelief is mentioned as sin, "because," says the Lord, "they believe not on me."

3. But what is it to believe on Christ? It is not simply to believe that he is God, or that he reigns in heaven in equal power with God the Father; many others believe that: But I believe on Christ when I believe that he is a gracious God to me and has taken my sins upon himself and reconciled me with God the Father, that my sins are his and his righteousness mine, that there is an intermingling and an exchange, that Christ is a mediator between me and the Father. For the sins of the whole world were laid upon Christ, and the righteousness of the Father, that is in Christ, will swallow up all our sins. No sins dare and can remain upon Christ. Such faith makes me pure and acceptable to the Father. Of this faith the pope and our highly educated leaders know nothing to speak, much less to believe. They teach that man should do many good works if he is to be acceptable to God and be free from sin, and that then God imparts to him his grace.

4. However, here the Lord speaks quite differently, and says: "The Holy Spirit will convict the world in respect of sin, because they believe not on me." Unbelief only is mentioned here as sin, and faith is praised as suppressing and extinguishing the other sins, even the sins in the saints. Faith is so strong and overpowering that no sin dare put it under any obligation. Although sins are present in pious and believing persons, they are not imputed to them, nor shall their sins condemn them. This is Paul's meaning when he says in Rom 8, 1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Their hearts are cleansed by faith, as Peter writes in Acts 15, 9. Therefore, whatever they do in this faith, in this assurance is all good, pure and pleasing to God. On the contrary, without this faith all their doings are sin and destruction, though their good works may shine and glitter as beautifully as they will, and even though they raise the dead. For Paul says: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin," Rom 14, 23.

5. What will now become of all the priests, nuns and monks who, wishing to escape sin, run into cloisters and undertake to do many good works without this faith? Unbelief is called sin, as I said, but to believe on Christ--that he takes my sins upon himself, reconciles me to the Father and at the same time makes me his heir of all that is in heaven and earth--this is good works. In John 6, 28-29, the Jews asked Christ: "What must we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." Yea, and should we preach thus, who will then enter the cloisters or contribute anything for them? The purses of the monks would then surely become flat, their kitchens scanty, their cellars empty and neglected. For this reason they will not allow faith to be preached; nay, they condemn this doctrine and banish its preachers. Indeed they have already set about it in good earnest. Christ further says: "Of righteousness, because I go to the Father."

II. THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVICTS THE WORLD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

6. Here all the learned come armed, yea, the whole world besides, and tell us what kind of righteousness this is. Yes, and they shall err. For the world has never known this righteousness; it does not yet know it, and it does not wish to know it. Hence, the Lord says here that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of this righteousness.

7. But what are we to understand here by "the world?" We dare not understand by it the coarse, outward sins, as adultery, murder, stealing and theft. There are instituted for such characters the wheels and gallows, with which the worldly powers, the kings, emperors and princes, have to do. But we will interpret "the world" as the subtle and secret sins, of which the Holy Spirit convicts, which the world does not know as sin. Yea, it pronounces them divine works; it applauds them and will not permit them to be called sins. How else can unbelief and other secret sins live in the heart while the heart itself is not conscious of them and knows not that they are sins? But those who convict the world must, on that account, be reviled as heretics and be banished from the country, as we see at present. Therefore, the Holy Spirit must convict the world.

8. The rod, however, by which the world is convicted and punished, is the divine Word and the holy Gospel, proclaimed by the apostles and preachers, as God the Father says to his Son in Ps 2, 9: "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." That is, you shall humble them with the holy Gospel. But the world resents such conviction and punishment; yet it punishes severely, and even more severely than the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit takes rods, but the world uses swords and fire. Isaiah also speaks in like terms of Christ our Lord in Is 11, 4: "He shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth; and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked."

9. What is now the righteousness the Lord means here? Some say righteousness is a virtue that gives to every person his own. Although this is a fine definition, yet it is misleading, in that we do not know how we are indebted to every one, to God and to man. This God desires and demands of us. Therefore, his righteousness is nothing more than the faith and grace of God, by which God makes us pious and righteous. Such righteousness we must have and thus be righteous, if we are to be found righteous and unblamable before God, and not only before man. For the smallest letter or tittle of the Law shall not fail, but all will be fulfilled.

10. Noah was found to be such a righteous man. It is written of him in Gen 6, 8-9: "Noah was a righteous man, and blameless in his generation; he walked with God. Therefore he found favour in the eyes of Jehovah." It is also written of Job, in Job 1, 1, that he was a perfect and upright man, one that feared God and turned away from evil. But that is done only by faith, when one believes that God has strangled and swallowed up one's sins in his righteousness. For this righteousness is nothing but to believe that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father; that he is equal with God possessing equal power; that he has become Lord by virtue of his passion, by which he has ascended to the Father, reconciled us with God

and is there as our mediator. This is what the prophet means in Ps 110, 1. "Jehovah saith unto my Lord, sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." Therefore, St. Paul calls Christ now a mediator, 1 Tim 2, 5; Heb 8, 6; then a throne of grace, Rom 3, 25; a propitiation, 1 John 2, 2, and other like names. God requires this honour from us and faith demands it that we possess him as our Lord and Saviour; and this glory he will not concede to any one else, as he says through the prophet: "My glory will I not give to another," Is 42, 8.

11. His way to the Father is his glory. For "to go" means to die, and to pass through death to the Father and enter upon another existence. He glories in his future course when he says: "I go unto the Father." Therefore, here righteousness is nothing more than traveling by faith the road through death unto the Father. This faith makes us righteous before God, this faith by which we believe that he delivered us from sin, death, Satan and hell, through his passion, and that thereby God, the Father, is reconciled and our sins are blotted out by his blood. This is also the reason that he mentions his going, when he says, in respect of righteousness, not that he is with the Father, but that he goes to the Father. In this going, sin is swallowed up in righteousness and Christ passes cheerfully through death, so that no one is even aware of it. Therefore it follows: "And ye behold me no more."

12. The nature and art of faith are here set forth: Faith neither feels nor gropes, nor do the things connected with it require a science; but it bestirs itself cheerfully to believe the things it neither feels nor can measure with all its powers inwardly or outwardly. Paul says in Rom 8,24: "Who hopeth for that which he seeth?" Therefore, the Lord aptly says: "And ye behold me no more." As if he would say that this way of good works which he is traveling, will not be seen nor grasped by the senses, but it must be believed. Now follows the third and last part of our Gospel.

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVICTS THE WORLD OF JUDGMENT, OR THE CROSS.

"Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged."

13. The prince of this world is Satan, and his members include all unbelieving and godless persons, all flesh with all its powers is condemned by these words, and what the world praises is condemned by God, including both the godly and the ungodly, believers and unbelievers, friends and enemies, as St. Peter cites in his first Epistle (4, 17), when he says: "For the time is come for judgment to begin at the house of God," that is, with the elect, in whom God dwells. The righteous, while they live here, have flesh and blood, in which sin is rooted. To suppress this sin God will lead them into great misery and anxiety, poverty, persecution and all kinds of danger (as Paul writes to the Romans, 7, 18ff; 8, 4; and to the Corinthians) until the flesh becomes completely subject to the Spirit.

14. That, however, does not take place until death, when the flesh is completely turned to ashes. We must be in all points like Christ. Since he was here despised, mocked and tried, so that, as the prophet Isaiah (53, 3) says, he was esteemed and held as one stricken and smitten of God, the most despised and unworthy, full of grief and sorrow. His disciples must also go through the same experiences. Everyone should carefully consider this. It is so decreed, as Christ himself before declared to his disciples, saying: "Remember the word that I said unto you, A servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me they will also persecute you." Jn 15, 20. Hence Paul says in very plain words in 2 Tim 3, 12: "All that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

15. Therefore, St. Peter carefully discriminates and says: "If judgment begin first at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the Gospel of God? And if the righteous is scarcely saved, where shall the ungodly and sinner appear?" I Pet 4, 17-18. This discrimination is between the sufferings of the godly and of the wicked. Godly and believing persons know their sins; they bear all their punishment patiently, and are resigned to God's judgment without the least murmur; therefore, they are punished only bodily, and

here in time, and their pain and suffering have an end. Unbelievers, however, since they are not conscious of their sins and transgressions, can not bear God's punishment patiently, but they resent it and wish their life and works to go unpunished, yea, uncensored. Hence, their punishment and suffering are in body and soul, here in time, and last forever beyond this life. The Lord says here, "The prince of this world is already judged." As if he were to say, All that the world and humanity in the world discover, praise and condemn, amounts to nothing; and whatever God judges the world cannot suffer nor bear, but rejects, repudiates and condemns.

16. Thus, three thoughts have been presented to us in this Gospel: Sin, righteousness and, finally, the cross and persecution. We shall be freed from sin through faith. If we believe that Christ made satisfaction for our sins and that his satisfaction is ours, that is then the righteousness. When we are free from sin, and are just and pious, then the world, Satan and the flesh will arise and contend and battle against us. Then come persecution and the cross. This we wish to have set forth in brief at present from this Gospel. May God grant his grace that we learn it thus, and know how to govern ourselves by it when we need it.

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