

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity; Luke 6:36-42

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

## BE MERCIFUL AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER IS MERCIFUL

1 This Gospel describes the works of love to our neighbour in temporal things. The Lord here describes these in few words, for he had just said, we should love our enemies, do good to them that hate us, bless them that curse us, pray for them that despitefully use us; if they smite us on one cheek, we should offer also the other; and from him that taketh away thy cloak withhold not thy coat also. All this he here condemns in a short conclusion, and in summing up all, says: "Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful." Here you see described as in a nutshell all the good works we are to do to one another, as our heavenly Father has done to us and still does without ceasing.

2. You have often heard that we need not do good works to God, but to our neighbour. We cannot make God stronger nor richer by our works, but we can make our neighbour stronger and richer with them; he is in need of them, and hence they should be directed to him and not to God. This you have often heard and you have it now in your ears; I would to God, that it might come also into your hands and feet.

3. Therefore observe here what a perversion it is for man to exercise himself in doing works to God, which should be done to his neighbour; and then centers his faith in men and saints, which he should center alone in God. Turn this around, and then it is right, thus: faith must belong alone to God, whoever receives the divine works, God alone does them, and the same works of God we receive alone through faith. Then we should apply ourselves to our neighbour and arrange all our affairs to the end that they serve our neighbour. Before God all should be done in pure faith alone. The reason of this is because no one can help us but God, and what we have in body and soul we have alone from God, and in him alone should we anchor our heart.

4. Now, they turn it around thus, so that they center faith, which is due to God, upon themselves and other people and they fall down before their own devised idols, and what the great masters have invented, and place their confidence in them. Is not that very Satan and death? as God in Jer. 2:13f. says: "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." Again he says in verse 35 to the people: Thou sayest, I shall turn my anger from thee, thou hast not sinned. "Behold, I will enter into judgment with thee, because thou sayest, I have not sinned."

5. First he says, that the bride has become a harlot and has turned from God; the living fountain from which flow life, salvation and all good, they have forsaken. Secondly, they turn to their own invention, and make their own fountain, in which there is no water. Thus also the Papists build upon their own inventions, saying mass, fasting, praying and the like; they indeed appear very much as though they were a fountain, as though they would draw from it life and salvation, yet it cannot hold any water; and they forsake God, the living fountain.

6. In this manner God says: They boldly rise up against me; I shall not be angry with them, they insist their ways and doings are right and enter into judgment with me. Behold, this is their other sin, that they are determined to defend their own doings. Therefore God says: I will enter into judgment with you and show you, how base you have become, in that you have continually gone your own way.

7. See, thus faith belongs to God alone and it should acquire for us from God alone what we need in temporal and spiritual matters; and it should acquire all in a way that it does not think it has merited it. This same faith should later again flow forth from our heart's depths to our neighbour freely and unhindered in good works; not that we wish to rest our salvation in them; for God will not have that, but wishes the conscience to rest in himself alone. Just like a bride must cleave to the bridegroom alone, and to no one else, so does God require also from us that we confide only in him.

8. This Luke explains when he says: "Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful." Here my conscience must be disposed toward God as a gracious, merciful father, and in harmony with this, go out to my neighbour and be also merciful to him. I must bring faith into my heart and up to God; and works out of my heart down to my neighbour. Thus Abraham did, when he went up on Mount Moriah to God, he left his servants and ass down at the foot of the mountain and took Isaac alone with him, Gen. 22:5. So should we also do: when we wish to ascend to God, we should come with Isaac alone, that is, with Christ through faith; the servants and ass, that is, our works, we should leave below.

9. Now this has been said of faith and works as an introduction to our Gospel lesson, namely, that the motion of faith is inward and upward, of works outward and downward. For thus are we righteous before God and men, in that we honour God and look direct to him and believe according to his Word, and in love do sufficient for our neighbour. Let us now consider the words of today's Gospel in their order. "Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

Now how is God our heavenly Father merciful? Thus, in that he gives us all things, natural and spiritual, temporal and eternal, gratuitously and out of pure goodness. For should he give unto us out of and according to our merits, he would have to give us only hell-fire and eternal condemnation. Therefore what he gives us in our possessions and honour, is given out of pure mercy. He sees that we are captives of death; but he is merciful and gives us life. He sees that we are the children of hell; but he is merciful and gives us heaven. He sees that we are poor, naked and exposed, hungry and thirsty; but he is merciful, and clothes, feeds and gives us to drink, and satisfies us with all good things. Thus, whatever we have for the body or spirit, he gives us out of mercy, and pours his blessings over us and into us. Therefore Christ says here: Imitate your Father and be also merciful,

as he is merciful.

11. Now this is not a common mercy, nor one that reason teaches. For that is selfish: it gives to the great and learned and those who merit it; loves those, who are beautiful; gives to those from whom it has some benefit or advantage. That is a political, beggarly, shaggy, piece-meal mercy. For if I give to him, who merited it, or if I regard beauty and friendship, then it is duty and debt and not mercy. This is also what the Lord meant, when he just before this Gospel in Luke 6:32-34 says: "And if ye love them that love you, what thank have ye? for even sinners love those that love them. And if ye do good to them that do good to you, what thank have ye? for even sinners do the same. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? even sinners lend to sinners, to receive again as much." However, Christian mercy should not seek its own; but it should be thus: it must be round, and open its eyes and look at all alike, friend and foe, as our heavenly Father does.

12. And where this mercy is not, there is also no faith. For if your heart is in the state of faith that you know your God has revealed himself to you to be so good and merciful, without thy merit, and purely gratuitously, while you were still his enemy and a child of eternal wrath; if you believe this, you cannot refrain from showing yourself so to your neighbour; and do all out of love to God and for the welfare of your neighbour. Therefore, see to it that you make no distinction between friend and foe, the worthy and the unworthy; for you see that all who were here mentioned, have merited from us something different than that we should love and do them good. And the Lord also teaches this, when in Luke 6:35 he says: "But love your enemies, and do good unto them, and lend, never despairing; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be sons of the Most High: for he is kind toward the unthankful and evil." Thus we have considered the first part of this Gospel.

13. Further one may say here: Have you not now taught that our works avail nothing before God in paying him for anything: how is it then that here the very contrary stands written, as Christ says: "Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful. And judge not, and ye shall not be judged: and condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven." All these sayings sound as though we should appear before God with our works and merit by virtue of them God's mercy and forgiveness; although you have nevertheless heard that faith does all.

14. Now note well, St. Paul and the holy Scriptures here and there teach this; for they emphasize that man must believe and appear before God with pure faith alone. Therefore the sayings, as they are here, are to be understood that works are only the test and confirmation of faith, so that if I believe, I must be merciful, not judge, not condemn, give and forgive my neighbour. Gen. 22:5f. is an example of this. What did Abraham, when he was called to offer his son? He was obedient to the commandment, and was about to sacrifice his son, and drew the sword to do it. What happened? The angel of Jehovah restrained him and said unto him: "Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me."

15. Thus here also; we must first receive before we give; before we can do acts of mercy, we must receive from God mercy. We do not lay the first stone; the sheep does not seek the shepherd, but the

shepherd the sheep; therefore it is also with our works, that we obtain nothing by them from God, but that we acquire all that we do acquire without any merit on our part. Thus in the prophet Isaiah 65:1, God says: "I am inquired of by them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not." And at the end of the same chapter he says: "And it shall come to pass that, before they call, I will answer, and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." For before we seek him, he finds us; before we ask for him, he has us. The same Paul Pays to the Romans, 3:22-26: "There is no distinction; for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; for the showing, I say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus." And in the following chapter, Rom. 4:4-5, he says: "Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but as of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness," "For if it be by grace it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace," as Paul writes later in Rom. 11:6.

16. In the second place the works are a sure sign and like a seal stamped on a letter, by which I am assured that my faith is right. The reason is: Do I feel in my heart, that my works flow forth out of love, then I am assured that my faith is genuine. If I forgive, then my forgiving assures me that my faith is genuine, and it seals and proves my faith, that God also has forgiven me and daily forgives me; but if I do not forgive, then may I at once conclude that I am lacking in faith. So it was also with Abraham, his works made known to him his faith. God well knew that Abraham believed; but he had to know and prove it.

17. Therefore the works are only continual spontaneous fruits and proofs of such faith. For of what use were it to me, if I had already strong faith and did not know it? As, if I had a chest full of gold and knew it not, it would be of no use to me; but when someone makes it known to me, he then does me as great a service as if he donated it to me. Just so, if I have faith, and know it not, it is of no use to me. Therefore faith must blossom forth and become known to me through the works following faith and these are then signs and seals that faith is present in my heart. St. Peter also teaches the same when in 2 Pet. 1:10-11 he conclusively says of the works of love and the virtues of faith: "Wherefore, brethren, give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never stumble: for thus shall be richly supplied unto you the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." He does not say, do good works that you may be called; but that you may make your calling and election sure, to your own satisfaction.

18. Therefore the Scriptures guard you well from blundering into them and fortifying your works by such passages. For works are rejected in Scripture, that we should not think of becoming righteous through them; but they are honoured and praised in Scripture in that they are needed by our neighbour and are signs and fruits of our faith.

19. See, I had to make this explanation in order that I might not strengthen the interpretations of the Papists, all of whom err in their understanding of this Gospel. Now, therefore God often places such passages against one another, as we and reason are apt to imagine, in order to exercise us in reading

the Scriptures, and that we may not think we know the whole Scriptures, when we hardly know a passage. Some passages convey the spirit and teaching, how we are to appear in God's presence, with nothing but our faith; as the passage: "Being justified freely (undeservedly, without merit, gratuitously, Ed.) by his grace." Then later in order that the body outwardly might not lie around lazy and become sluggish, we have also passages, which direct and exercise the body; as those above. "Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven; give, and it shall be given unto you;" and the passages in Mat. 25:42f., where our Lord Christ says, he will require works of us on the day of judgment, when he will say to the condemned: "I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not," and so on. These passages the ignorant and fickle spirits wish to cram together and murder, and construe everything to refer to works; and that is wrong. But those who are spiritual refer them only to their body and stand before God also only in spirit: that is right and also necessary; for man is made up of two parts, spirit and flesh. Therefore some passages refer to naked faith in the spirit, others to naked works done to the body; for a passage of Scripture cannot refer at the same time to the spirit and also to the body.

20. Here we should also speak on the attitude we are to take to our neighbour with respect to our temporal possessions. With regard to his possessions one should act thus: he should part with some to others, should loan and give to his neighbour, where and when he will. And for doing this we have rigid commandments and not only words of advice, as they explain them who teach, that whoever wishes to be perfect should do them. Consequently those wishing to live thus, have retired into monasteries and have desired to become perfect. Hence all monasteries are founded upon the filth of the devil. For there are no people more avaricious and less benevolent than just those in the monasteries. Now, if one wishes to be a Christian, he should loan to others, to the extent of his ability, freely without any writing. Again, if we see one has nothing with which to pay us back, we should freely donate it to him and cancel the debt, as Nehemiah did, as is recorded in the fifth chapter of II Esdras (Neh. 5). For God has given this to you, he can indeed give you more, if you believe differently. Further, if one takes anything from us, we are not to demand it to be returned; but our neighbour is to intercede for us and help to restrain injustice and to enter a complaint against the authorities, in order that we may not suffer too much.

21. Now observe the monks and priests have entirely and completely twisted these works, that they should be only advisable. And in this way they have drawn all other persons from them, who then, having done no Christian work during their whole lives, provide for the saying of masses or leave other legacies when they are about to die, by which all is fulfilled and accomplished. But you hear now: If we wish to be Christians, we must loan, give and part with our possessions, or we will be deficient in our faith.

22. Therefore thoroughly ponder and grasp this Gospel, in order that you may not deal with God in any other way than through naked faith and let good works gush from such faith that they may serve only your neighbour. This has been said of the first part of our Gospel text. Now. let us see what follows further, since the Lord himself explains what kind of mercy he means. He says: "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: and condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: give, and it shall be given unto you."

23. Here the Lord divides mercy into three parts, that we may know what mercy is which we are to exercise toward our neighbour. First, we are not to judge or condemn; second, we are to forgive our neighbour, if he has offended us; third, you are to come to the help of the needy: this is what the word "mercy" means, when used in the Scriptures.

24. And all this must flow out of an upright faith so that it be done without hypocrisy and without guile, and that we may have no respect of persons. For if you would wish them well, who wish you well; or benefit those, who benefit you; or harm those, who harm you, that would be a great error. But you should do to him as Christ here just preceding our Gospel text says: You should imitate your heavenly Father and love your enemies, do good to those who do harm to you, forgive him who offends you, loan to him who is in need, and so on, as you have heard.

25. Now, to speak of the first part, how we should not judge nor condemn, we remark that God has appointed the sword of the state to punish public crime, only that care must be taken that it be not used contrary to God's precept and command, for example, that we do not murder one when he is innocent. For when the judge does injustice, he is at the same time as much a murderer as others. Of this judgment the Lord here does not speak; he has in mind Luke 12:14, where he said to him who wished he should say to his brother that he should divide the inheritance with him: "Who made me a judge or a divider over you." For Christ's kingdom is not concerned about outward matters.

26. But the Lord speaks here of another judgment, namely, that one esteems another good or bad because of that which one does not see on the outside, which judgment belongs to God alone. For it can happen that you see your neighbour sin today whom God receives tomorrow. You can indeed also be pious in your own eyes and not think of your own sins. Such judging Christ has forbidden, for no love or unity can be where people thus judge and condemn. To judge or condemn one another is nothing but to have a beam in your own eye; as all hypocrites have in their eyes. For those who regard themselves righteous, take offence at their brethren; whatever they do displeases them, and they will not behold their own sins. But it so happens that you will not discover the beam in your own eye, if you behold continually the sins of others, and thus fall under the judgment of God. From this it follows then, that you, who judge another, art a greater sinner before God, than the lowest villain or the worst harlot, for God alone knows who shall be saved or condemned; all sin is nothing compared to your judging.

27. The same hypocrites are adepts in rejoicing over and taking pleasure in having an opportunity to gossip about the fall and crime of a neighbour, and to stir up his filth. And what other persons do, they always construe in the worst light, and no one can do, anything to please them; and although they themselves cannot at once do this, they nevertheless gladly hear others speak of it. if you were a godly person you should cover up and help to quiet such things, as much as it may be possible for you. And it generally happens that the worst harlots, even according to the flesh, also judge and pass sentence; yea, they judge not only human beings, but also God himself.

28. Therefore, is thy brother a sinner, then cover his sin and pray for him. Dost thou publish his sins, then truly thou art not a child of your merciful Father; for otherwise thou wouldst be also as he, merciful. It is certainly true that we cannot show as great mercy to our neighbour, as God has to us;

but it is the true work of the devil that we do the very opposite of mercy, which is a sure sign that there is not a grain of mercy in us. All this is the meaning of the text of this Gospel, when it says: "Can the blind guide the blind? shall they not both fall into a pit? The disciple is not above his teacher: but every one when he is perfected shall be as his teacher. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye., but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me cast out the mote that is in thy eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote that is in thy brother's eye."

29. As if the Lord would say: You think thy Brother is blind and will punish him, that is, you wish to guide others and you are blind yourself. You hold him as a sinner and think you are righteous. What difference is that than that your heart is so disposed as to think you are better than he? This means nothing more nor less than that you wish to guide others, and yet you are blind yourself; and whoever follows you will fall into the ditch with you. Concerning characters who imagine they are better than others and would that the people followed them more than the Word of God, Paul says to the Romans, 2:17:23: "But if thou bearest the name of a Jew, and retest upon the law, and gloriest in God, and knowest his will, and approvest the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them that are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having in the law the form of knowledge and of the truth; thou therefore that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou rob temples? thou who gloriest in the law, through thy transgression of the law dishonourest thou God?" Therefore he says also at the beginning of the same chapter to the hypocrites: "Wherefore thou art without excuse, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest dost practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against them that practice such things. And reckonest thou this, O man, who judgest them that practice such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?"

30. I call that telling the truth to the hypocrites who understand to show others the way, which they themselves do not know, and guide others along with themselves into the ditch. Therefore the Lord says: "The disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is perfected shall be as his teacher." It is a common proverb to say: I cannot learn more from my teacher, than he knows. Why did the Lord utter this saying? Because of two kinds of teachers: the first is blind; if I follow him, then I also will be blind; if he falls into the ditch, so will I. The other teacher is the merciful Father, from whom we should learn mercy; follow we him, then we also will be merciful, even as he is merciful; and if we were merciful all the time, then we would be perfect, even as he is perfect; but that does not fully take place while we are here in this life.

31. The second part of mercy is that we are to forgive those who offend us. A Christian can never be so greatly offended, that he should not forgive, not only seven times, but seventy times seven, as the Lord spoke to Peter in Mat. 18:22. Therefore God also forgives a Christian his sins or infirmities, so that he may forgive others their infirmities. This Christ pictured just before in a beautiful parable, which he closed with the words: "So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not

everyone his brother from your hearts."

32. And we pray for this also daily in the Lord's Prayer, when we pray the petition and say: Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Is not that something great, when I a poor sinner forgive my neighbour his sins or failings, that God will forgive me also my sins and infirmities? Had one murdered my father, what would that be compared to my sin, with which I have offended and provoke God to anger.

33. The third element that belongs to mercy is, that we should give to the poor and needy and come to their help. Concerning this John in his first Epistle, 3:17, says: "But whoso hath the world's goods, and beholdeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his compassion from him, doth the love of God abide in him?" For where the love of God is, it must manifest itself. To this the saying of Christ in Mat. 5:7 refers: "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." Therefore the Lord adds here in our Gospel a promise, and says: "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they give into your bosom." And he further says: "For with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again."

34. This is sufficient for the present on the three parts of the mercy we are to show to our neighbour. To this end should the saying of Christ in Mat. 7:12 especially stir us. After he spoke so much about Christian love and how we should show our brother such love, he concludes and says: "All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets." Now everyone is always so disposed, if he be sick, that he wishes the whole world would come to his help. Am I a poor sinner, steeped in shame, have I a heavy afflicted conscience: then I ought to wish for the whole world to comfort and help me, and cover my sins and my shame. Just such should my attitude be to my neighbour, not to judge and condemn, forgive his failings, help him, counsel, loan and give to him as I would that others should do to me, if I were overwhelmed with anxiety and want, with misery and poverty.

35. And just in this way does the world take knowledge of Christians, how they live among themselves and show one another such acts of mercy. This the Lord Christ also taught his disciples in the Lord's Supper when in John 13:34-35 he said: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." Such is the explanation of this Gospel; let us pray to God for his grace.

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