

[CHRIST HEALS THE MAN WITH DROPSY ON THE SABBATH AND TEACHES ABOUT HUMILITY -- THE SERMON CONTAINS A GOOD SECTION ON THE PROPER INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN AND DIVINE LAW.]

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity; Luke 14:1-11

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

1. This Gospel offers us two leading thoughts; one is general and is found in all our Gospel lessons, the other is peculiar to this one. First, in its general character, it shows who the Lord Jesus is and what we may expect of him, and in this is exhibited both faith and love.
2. Faith is here set forth in that this man, sick with the dropsy, looks to Christ and firmly believes he will help him. This faith he had as the result of his previous acquaintance with Jesus. He knows him as a kind, friendly and sympathetic man who always helps everyone and lets none go away un comforted. Had he not heard such reports about the Lord he would not have followed him, even into the house. He must indeed have had some gospel knowledge and believed the wonderful things spoken about him.
3. And this is the Gospel, as I said, that must be preached and heard before there can be faith. We must know that God is kindly disposed toward us and has sent his Son from heaven to help us. This the conscience must hear and believe; for if God were unfriendly and unmerciful toward us, it would avail little to know that all his creatures sympathize with us. If God is satisfied with us, no creature can do us any harm, as St. Paul says in Rom. 8, 31: "If God is for us, who is against us?" Let death, devil, hell and all creation rage; we are safe. Therefore it is the Gospel that must present to us the God-man as merciful. This is the fountain from which our heart can draw faith and a friendly confidence toward God that he will help both the dying and the living in every distress.
4. We notice this here in the man afflicted with dropsy. He had heard of the kindness of Jesus to others and now believes that he will show the same to him. Had he not believed, it would have been impossible to help him. The Gospel resounds in all the world, but it is not heard by everybody. The Pharisees also sat there; they saw these things with their own eyes and failed not to notice what a friendly man Jesus was, but they believed not; hence the Gospel could neither reform them nor give them help and comfort. Thus the Gospel is very universal, but the true laying hold of it is very rare. So much in regard to faith.
5. Later we have here pictured to us also the love in Christ that goes forth and bears fruit, not for itself but for others, as is the nature of true love to do. This is now said on the first part of today's

Gospel.

6. However, this Pericope especially teaches us in the second place a necessary doctrine we must possess, if we are to make use of the laws that order the outward and temporal matters and affairs, which the church is to observe. Here we must act wisely and gently, if we wish to do the right thing, especially when weak and timid consciences are concerned. For there is nothing more tender in heaven and on earth, and nothing can bear less trifling, than the conscience. The eye is spoken of as a sensitive member, but conscience is much more sensitive. Hence we notice how gently the Apostles dealt with conscience in divers matters, lest it be burdened with human ordinances.

7. But as we cannot live without law and order, and as it is dangerous to deal with law since it is too apt to ensnare the conscience, we must say a little about human laws and ordinances and how far they are to be observed. The proverb says: "Everything depends upon having a good interpreter." That is particularly true here where human ordinances are concerned. Where there is no one to interpret and explain the law rightly it is difficult and dangerous to have anything to do with it. Take, for example, a ruler who acts like a tyrant and abuses his authority. If he makes a law and urgently insists on the law being executed, he treats conscience as if he had a sword in his hand and were intent on killing. We have experienced this in the tyrannical laws of popery, how consciences were tormented and hurled into hell and damnation. Yea, there is great danger where one does not know how to temper and apply the laws.

8. Therefore we conclude that all law, divine and human, treating of outward conduct, should not bind any further than love goes. Love is to be the interpreter of law. Where there is no love, these things are meaningless, and law begins to do harm; as is also written in the Pope's book: "If a law or ordinance runs counter to love, it will soon come to an end." This is in brief spoken of divine and human laws. The reason for enacting all laws and ordinances is only to establish love, as Paul says, Rom. 13, 10: "Love therefore is the fulfilment of the law." Likewise verse 8: "Owe no man anything, save to love one another." For if I love my neighbour, I help him, protect him, hold him in honour, and do what I would have done to me.

9. Since then all law exists to promote love, law must soon cease where it is in conflict with love. Therefore, everything depends upon a good leader or ruler to direct and interpret the law in accordance with love. Take the example of the priests and monks. They have drawn up laws that they will say mass and do their praying and juggle with God in other ways at given hours according to the clock. If now a poor man should call and ask for a service at an hour when they were to hold mass or repeat their prayers, they might say: "Go your way; I must now read mass, must attend to my prayers," and thus they would fail to serve the poor man, even if he should die. In this manner the most sanctimonious monks and Carthusians act; they observe their rules and statutes so rigorously that, although they saw a poor man breathing his last breath and could help him so easily, yet they will not do it. But the good people, if they were Christians, ought to explain the laws and statutes in harmony with love, and say: Let the mass go, let the sacraments, prayers, and the ordinances all go; I will dispense with works, I will serve my neighbour; love put in practice in serving my neighbour is golden in comparison with such human works.

10. And thus we should apply every law, even as love suggests, that it be executed where it is helpful to a fellow-man, and dispensed with where it does harm. Take a common illustration: If there were a housekeeper who made the rule in his home to serve now fish, then meat, now wine, then beer, even as it suits him; but perchance some one of his household took sick and could not drink beer or wine, nor eat meat or fish, and the housekeeper would not give him anything else, but say: No, my rules and regulations prescribe thus; I cannot give you anything else: what kind of a housekeeper would such an one be? One ought to give him sneeze-wort to purge his brain. For if he were a sensible man he would say: It is indeed true that my rules and regulations prescribe meat or fish for the table today, yet since this diet does not agree with you, you may eat what you like. See how a housekeeper may adjust his own rules and make them conform to the love he entertains for his household. Thus all law must be applied as love toward a fellow-man may dictate.

11. Therefore, since the Mosaic law was not understood nor modified by love in the Old Testament, God promised the people through Moses that he would raise up a prophet who should interpret the law to them. For thus Moses says in Deut. 18, 25: "Jehovah thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall harken." God raised up prophets from time to time to explain the law and apply it, not in its rigor, but in love. Of this Moses himself is an example. He led the children of Israel out of Egypt for forty years hither and thither through the desert. Abraham had been commanded in Gen. 17, 12, to circumcise every male on the eighth day. This commandment was plain enough that all had to observe it, yet Moses neglected it and circumcised no one the whole forty years.

12. Now, who authorized Moses to violate this commandment, given to Abraham by God himself? His authority was vested in his knowledge of the law's spirit; he knew how to interpret and apply it in brotherly love, namely, that the law was to be serviceable to the people, and not the reverse. For, if during their journey they had to be ready day by day for warfare, circumcision would have hindered them, and he therefore omitted it, saying in effect: Although this law is given and should be observed, yet we will apply it in the spirit of love, and suspend its operation until we come to the end of our journey. Likewise should all laws be interpreted and applied as love and necessity may demand. Hence the importance of a good interpreter.

13. It was the same in the case of David when he partook of the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for anyone to eat, except the priest, 1 Sam. 21, 6; as Christ himself makes use of this example in Mat. 12, 3. David was not consecrated, nor were his servants. When he was hungry he went to Ahimelech and asked for himself and men something to eat. Ahimelech answered: I have indeed nothing to give; the shew-bread of the tabernacle is for holy use. Then David and his men helped themselves and ate freely of it. Did David sin in the face of God's ordinance? No. Why not? Because necessity compelled him, seeing there was nothing else to eat. It is in this way that necessity and love may override law.

14. That is what Christ also does in our Gospel, when he heals the suffering man on the Sabbath, although he well knew how strictly the Old Testament required the observance of the Sabbath. But see what the Pharisees do! They stand by watching the Lord. They would not have helped the sick man with a spoonful of wine, even if they could have done so. But Christ handles the law even at

the risk of violating it, freely helps the poor man sick with the dropsy and gives the public a reason for his action, when he says, in effect: It is indeed commanded to keep the Sabbath day, yet where love requires it, there the law may be set aside. This he follows up with an illustration from everyday life, then dismisses them in a way they must commend, and they answer him not a word. He says: "Which of you shall have an ox or an ass fallen into a well and will not straightway draw him up on the Sabbath day?"

15. As if to say: Ye fools, are ye not mad and stupid! If you act thus in the case of saving an ox or an ass which may perhaps be valued at a few dollars, how much rather should one do the same to a neighbour, helping him to his health, whether it be the Sabbath or not! For the Sabbath, as he says elsewhere, was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So that the son of man is lord even of the Sabbath, Mark 2, 27.

16. Among the Jews there was a rigorous enforcement of the law, even their kings insisted on its strict observance. When the prophets came and explained the law in the spirit of love, saying: This is what Moses means, thus the law is to be understood, then there were false prophets at hand to side with the kings, insisting on the literal text and saying: There, so it is written; it is God's Word; one must not interpret it otherwise. Thereupon the kings proceeded to kill one prophet after another. In the same way the Papists, priests and monks act now. If anyone says: We need not observe their laws literally, but we should rather interpret them in love; then they immediately cry, Heretic! Heretic!! and if they could they would kill him; yea, they do so already quite lustily.

17. As Christ here treats of the law relating to the Sabbath and makes it subserve the needs of man, so we should treat laws of that kind and keep them only so far as they accord with love. If laws do not serve love, they may be annulled at once, be they God's or man's commands. Take an illustration from our former darkness and sorrow under the Papacy. Suppose someone had vowed to visit St. Jacob, and he remembers the words: "Pay that which thou vowest," Eccl. 5, 4. He may have a wife, children or household to care for. What should such an one do? Should he proceed to St. Jacob, or remain at home and support his family? There, decide for yourselves which would be most needful and what harmonizes best with the spirit of love. I regard it best for him to remain home at work and attend to the care of his family. For his pilgrimage to St. Jacob, even if that were not idolatrous and wrong in itself, would be of little profit to him, yea, he would spend and lose more than he could gain.

18. Another example. A mother is about to bear a child, who vowed to eat no flesh on Wednesdays, as many foolish women do. And perhaps because of this vow the mother may injure her offspring and her own body. Then the foolish confessional fathers come and say: Dear daughter, it is written in the Scriptures, what one vows, that must be kept; it is God's command and thou must at any peril keep thy vow. Thus the good woman is soon taken captive and chained by her conscience, goes and fulfils her vow, and does harm both to herself and her offspring. Hence both have sinned, those who taught her thus, and the woman in that she did not esteem her love more than her vow, by which she neither served nor pleased God; yea, more than this, she thus provoked God to anger by keeping her vow. Therefore we should say to such a foolish mother. Behold, thou art about to bear a child, and thou must serve it and desist from this foolish thing, so that great harm may not spring from it; for

all laws find their end in love.

19. We should act in like manner toward the false priests, monks and nuns. When they say: Yea, we have vowed so and so, and it is written: "Vow, and pay unto Jehovah your God," Ps. 76, 11, then say to them: Look, there is also a command: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." But in your vocation it is impossible to serve your neighbour, nor can You continue in it without sin. Therefore, forsake it openly and enter a state in which you are not so apt to sin, but where you may serve your fellow-man, help and counsel him; and do not bother about a vow which you did not give to God your Lord, but to the devil; not for the salvation of souls and blessedness, but for damnation and ruin of both soul and body.

20. If you are a Christian you have power to dispense with all commandments so far as they hinder you in the practice of love, even as Christ here teaches. He goes right on, although it is the Sabbath day, helps this sick man and gives a satisfactory and clear reason for his Sabbath work.

21. There is yet another thought in this Gospel about taking a prominent seat at feasts, which we must consider, When the Lord noticed how the guests, the Pharisees, chose to sit in the first seats, he gave them the following parable to ponder: "When thou art bidden of any man to a marriage feast, sit not down in the chief seat; lest haply a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him, and he that bade thee and him shall come and say to thee, Give this man place;. and then thou shalt begin with shame to take the lower place. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest place; that when he that hath bidden thee cometh, he may say to thee, Friend, go up higher. Then shalt thou have glory in the presence of all that sit at meat with thee."

22. This parable is aimed at the laws and precepts of the Pharisees and scribes which provide that honour should be paid to the great and powerful, giving them the preference and allowing them to sit at the head. Christ here reverses the order and says: "He that would be the greatest, let him take the lowest seat." Not that a peasant should be placed above a prince; that is not what Christ means, nor would that be proper. But our Lord does not speak here of worldly, but of spiritual things, where humility is specially commended. Let rulers follow the custom of occupying the uppermost seats at festive boards, we have to do here with matters of the heart. Christ does not appoint burgomasters, judges, princes, lords; these stations in life he ignores as subject to civil order and the dictates of reason. There must be rulers and to them honours are due because of their position; but the spiritual government requires that its participants humble themselves, in order that they may be exalted.

23. Therefore the Lord said to his disciples when they disputed as to who should be the greatest among them: "The kings of the Gentiles have lordship over them, and they that have authority over them are called Benefactors. But ye shall not be so; but he that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve," Luke 22, 25-27. He then speaks of himself as an illustration, asking: "For which is the greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am in the midst of you as he that serveth." And in another place, Mat. 20, 26-28, he said: "Whosoever would become great among you Shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

24. The Papists have commented on these verses in their own way and twisted this Gospel, saying: Yea, the Pope is to be the least or youngest, sitting at the foot and serving others; but that is to take place in the heart. They pretended to sit at the foot and to serve others as the humblest; but withal they lorded it over all emperors, kings and princes, yea, trampled them in the dust; just as if emperors, kings, prince's and rulers should not also possess in their hearts the humility of which the Lord here treats. They thus put on airs and make a show of their carnal interpretation. If they had any humility in their hearts their lives would bear testimony to it. Christ speaks here not of outward humility alone, for the inner is the source of the outer; if it is not in the heart it will hardly be manifest in the body.

25. Therefore the Gospel aims at making all of us humble, whatever and whoever we may be, that none may exalt himself, unless urged and elevated by regular authority. That is what the Lord wants to inculcate by this parable, directing it to all, be they high or low. In this spirit he reproves the Pharisees and others who desire high places and are ambitious to get ahead of others. They may accept honours when regularly elected and forced to accept high places. I make these remarks to contravene and discredit their false spiritual interpretations.

26. But now they go and mingle and confuse spiritual and worldly things, and claim it is enough if they be humble in heart when they strive for the chief seats. Nay, dear friends, heart-humility must manifest itself in outer conduct, or it is false. All should therefore be willing to take a lower seat, even to throw themselves at the feet of others, and not move up higher, until urged to do so. Anyone who regards this rule, will do well; but he who disregards it will come to grief by so doing. That is what our Lord desires to impress upon his hearers as he closes this parable. "For every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

27. St. Augustine adds a comment here which I wish he had not made, for it savors of vanity, when he says: "A ruler must not abase himself too much, lest his authority be weakened thereby." This is heathenish and worldly, not Christian; but we can pardon it in such a man, for even the saints on earth are not yet entirely perfect.

28. The sum of this Gospel then is: Love and necessity control all law; and there should be no law that cannot be enforced and applied in love. If it cannot, then let it be done away with, even though an angel from heaven had promulgated it. All this is intended to help and strengthen our hearts and consciences. In this way our Lord himself teaches us how we should humble ourselves and be subject one to another. [However concerning this virtue, what true humility is, I have said enough in former Postils c.] Let this suffice on today's Gospel.

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