

[THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST CONSISTS IN THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. ONE OF LUTHER'S BEST.]

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity; Matthew 9:1-8

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil. First published in pamphlet form in 1525.

## I. THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST

1. My friends in Christ, as we hear and enjoy this Gospel every year, I hope you also understand it, and know what it teaches us, and may God grant that the right life may also follow this knowledge! For the greater part of the Gospel we hear only with the ear, and we know it, but do not live according to it, whereas it should be so taught that few words and nothing but life would be the result. But what shall we do for it? We can do no more than preach it and no further raise it and carry it, we must preach and urge it until God comes and gives us his grace to the end that our words be few and that life may spring forth and grow. The first theme here offered us is the Gospel when Christ says: "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven."

2. These words show and contain in brief what the kingdom of Christ is, namely, this sweet voice, these motherly and fatherly words penetrating our inmost soul: "Thy sins are forgiven." In no other sense are we to view the kingdom of Christ, so far as it is understood, than how we are to live before God. As you, beloved, well know that our highest duty is rightly to establish the conscience that we may know how we stand before God and our neighbour. Therefore we must also hold fast to these words and become accustomed to the expression: "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven", and like sayings of which the Gospel is full.

3. From this it follows that the kingdom of Christ is realized where nothing but comfort and the forgiveness of sins reign not only in words to proclaim it, which is also necessary; but also in deed, as we shall see in this example. For he did not only speak these words into the ear of this sick man; but he also forgave his sins and comforted him. This knowledge is proper for us Christians to know. It is indeed easily and quickly said and heard; but when it comes to the test the light is early extinguished, and satan soon leads us astray; as you here observe that the scribes undertake to destroy this knowledge. I have before often said and will always say, that you should beware and properly learn the character and nature of the kingdom of Christ. For you know how reason is inclined in its every movement to fall from faith and from this knowledge to works. But here you see no works at all, no merit, here there is neither command nor law; there is nothing more than the offering of Christ's assistance, his comfort and his grace, only kindness meets the man sick of the palsy.

4. Therefore, if the kingdom of Christ is to grow, we must keep out of it with the law, and not be busy with works; for it is not in harmony with it to say: Go out and run hither and thither and atone for your sins; you must observe and do this and that, if you will be free from sin; but directly without any work and law, out of pure grace, your sins are forgiven. Therefore, it is beyond the sphere of the kingdom of Christ to urge the people with the law.

5. But we receive such things only with the ear and on the tongue, and it enters not into the depth of the heart; for sin at all times still hangs about our necks, it clings firmly to us, as St. Paul speaks of this in Romans, 7, 18-19, and Heb. 12, 1. But in death we will experience it. Of this class are at present our fanatics who boast of the Holy Spirit, and pretend they would do better, some of whom are also in our midst, listen to us and contend that it is not enough for us to preach only faith and love. Yea, they say, You must do better and climb much higher. How high then must I climb? You must destroy pictures, you must kill the ungodly, and do whatever they propose. This filth now enters nearly every community where the Gospel has just been planted. These tares of Satan will also come to us, as I have often warned you. Take heed that you remain sound in your knowledge, in the true doctrine of Christ, for this knowledge and light is soon lost.

6. Thus I say, my friends, and would beseech you not to esteem that spirit great who proposes to you any kind of work, call it what you may, even if it would raise the dead, which they have not yet been able to do. And how is it that they say: we must kill the godless! Even if Moses commanded it that you must really do it, what sort of Christians are you then? But by this you shall truly experience which spirits are of God. and which are not. For if you give me a work to do, it is not the Holy Spirit who does it; but he goes and first brings me the grace of Christ, and then leads me to works. For thus he speaks: Thy sins are forgiven, be of good cheer, and the like. He does not first insist on works, but first leads up to God through his sweet Word and grace, and does not immediately refer you to do some work; but later you will find works enough to do unto your neighbour.

7. But the fanatics soon torment us with works, and profess to have a nobler spirit; they urge and insist upon our doing something first of all, and permit faith and love to be overlooked. This of course is not of the Holy Spirit. Christ first takes possession of the conscience, and when it is right in faith toward God, then he also directs us to do works toward our neighbour. But he first highly extols faith and keeps works in the background. This they cannot understand. I would forgive them everything, if they would only not patch and mend their good works, to which they trust their existence, honour and fame. I would not care about their destroying all pictures, and melting cups and bells into one mass; but that they should make a matter of conscience out of it for those who do not destroy pictures, just as though the Holy Spirit or faith were not present unless this work be performed.

8. I say this: Even if it were a work which God at this present hour commanded, I would not so insist upon it and condemn those who do not immediately obey it; and would find him some kind of protection, as that he is yet perhaps weak, and thus spread over him the kingdom of grace. Let us be conscious of the fact that the work among them is directed to God, and not toward our neighbour. They make their works a necessity and say: If you do this, then you are a Christian; if you will not do it, you are no Christian. Where this or that is done there are Christians. And the fame follows

their work, that they want to be esteemed better than others. Now you have the true light, therefore be warned. Prove the spirits. We do not wish to prefer ourselves, as these persons do; but we boast in this, that we hear the Word, "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven." I know that I have a gracious God; but these spirits cannot do this. Therefore it is a mere devilish apparition that they carry from house to house. In this they lie against the Holy Spirit, and blame the Holy Ghost that he is the father of their cause. And even if the works were good, the forcing and compelling must remain in the background. Let them then keep quiet about setting us an example by their crazy works.

9. The kingdom of Christ consists in finding all our praise and boast in grace. Other works should be free, not to be urged, nor should we wish by them to become Christians, but condescend with them to our neighbour. Thus we should hear this Gospel to hold fast to its expressions so that they may be written in our hearts, that this light, this Word and lamp may truly shine in us, by which we can judge all other doctrines. Thus he says to the man sick with the palsy: "Thy sins are forgiven". These and similar words are to be taken to heart and meditated upon, since they are nothing but pure grace, and no work, by which the conscience is oppressed and forced to do something. Thus, with these words you must protect yourselves against false teachers.

10. We have now sowed a little of the Word, and this the devil cannot stand, for he never sleeps; the worms and the beetles will come and infect it. Yet so it must be, Christ will prove his Word, and examine who has received it and who not. Therefore let us remain on the right road to the kingdom of Christ, and not go about with works and urge and force the works of the law, but only with the words of the Gospel which comfort the conscience: Be happy, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven.

11. By this observe how narrow and how wide the kingdom of Christ is. Few there be who so receive the Word that it tastes good to them and judge themselves by it, and who understand what is said by: "Thy sins are forgiven." If we are now in the kingdom of Christ why then does he mention sin? Are sins always there? No one belongs to this kingdom unless his sins are revealed to him by the Gospel, otherwise these words apply to no one: "Thy sins are forgiven." Indeed all hear the Gospel, but it does not enter the hearts of all, for they do not all feel their sins. But the Gospel preaches that everything we have in us is sin. Therefore it also offers comfort; forgiveness of sins is here. If I am to receive forgiveness of sins, I must have knowledge of sin.

12. Forgiveness of sins is nothing more than two words, in which the whole kingdom of Christ consists. There must be sins, and if we are conscious of them, we must confess them; when I have confessed them, forgiveness and grace are immediately present. Before forgiveness is present there is nothing but sin. This sin must be confessed that I may feel and know that all that is in me is blindness; otherwise forgiveness of sins could not exist where there is no sin. However, there is no lack of sins to confess, but the lack is in not feeling and knowing our sins to confess them; then only forgiveness of them follows. But it is quite a different thing when God forgives sins, than when one man forgives another. One man forgives another his sins in a way that he thinks of them again tomorrow, or casts them up to him. But when God forgives sins it is quite a different thing than when man forgives. For God condemns no more, he banishes all wrath from him, yea, he no more

thinks of the sin, as he himself says in the prophet Isaiah, 43, 25. Now if this wrath is gone, then hell, the devil, death and all misfortune that the devil may bring with him, must also disappear; and instead of wrath God gives grace, comfort, salvation and everything good that he himself is.

13. Sin is pure unhappiness, forgiveness pure happiness. The divine majesty is great, great is also that which it forgives. As the man is, so is also his forgiveness. But you must know in your heart how great these words are in which you know how to trust, yea, for which you can cheerfully die. But only few rightly receive these words, therefore there are but few true Christians.

14. This then is the kingdom of Christ, and he who possesses it thus, possesses it in the right way. Here there is no work, but only the acknowledgment of all our misfortune, and the reception of all the gifts of God. Here there is nothing but simple comfort, here the words are continually heard: Be joyful, let not your conscience be troubled because of sin, or because you have not done a great amount of good; I will forgive you all. Therefore it is not by merit, but it is a simple gift. This is the Gospel, upon which faith depends, through which you grasp and keep these words, so that they may not have been spoken in vain. For we have no other comfort of which God tells us to boast than that God says: "Be of good cheer, be comforted; for I forgive thy sins; and in my forgiveness you can glory and rejoice." Here then you have reason to boast and rejoice, but not in your own works.

15. This the workrighteous person cannot do, for honour always follows, as they have said: honour follows virtue as the shadow follows the man. If it is the honour of works, whether man or God has commanded them, it is nothing; if it is the honour of the works God does in us it is all right, as Psalm 118, 16 says: "The right hand of Jehovah is exalted; the right hand of Jehovah doth valiantly." As though he should say: "In this will I boast and glory, namely, in that he has exalted me out of death, hell and all evil." Workrighteous people have not this glory, for they have not the Word; but as the work is, so is the praise, they urge and compel us to depart from the Word to human work. But the Holy Spirit urges us from our works to the Word. The former boast of their works, the latter, where the Holy Spirit is, rejoice internally in the heart with God, that he has done this work, and they remain clinging to grace, and attribute nothing at all to their own works.

16. Thus the scribes do here. When they heard these words they said among themselves: "This man blasphemeth." For this is the nature of the holy Gospel and the true Word of God where it is truly believed, that it is blasphemed on both sides, and the whole world would destroy it; as was the case in the time of the Apostles, and as our raging princes now do, who simply wish it were dead, entirely crushed and destroyed with all those who preach and confess it. This however is the least persecution.

17. The other persecution is much worse, which takes place among us as it also did in Apostolic times among the Apostles. So too our country squires, who enjoy the Gospel with us, and do not want to be followers of the Pope, but to be regarded as Christians; they must plunge into it; so furious they are that they boast of the Gospel, and yet they trust in their works. And here the Holy Spirit must be called the devil, there the beautiful spirit. But we must venture to say: Their cause is not just; then they will say again: Your cause is not right; for the wicked spirit does not rest unless it is praised. We have a Lord of protection, he will successfully accomplish his work.

18. Paul calls all false spirits bold and proud. Yes, in their filth with their protectors they are proud and impudent, otherwise they are the most cowardly villains that can be found. When they are to appear and answer for their conduct, they cannot produce a single answer. Among themselves they are bold, and venture to catch God in his own Word; but when it comes to the test, they simply despair. But the Holy Spirit stands firm, checks their buffeting, makes us bold and courageous, comforts weak consciences and says: "Be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven." The true spirit is bashful, and becomes bashful in the sight of God, as Christians do who bow before God, honour him and are not proud. But before tyrants the Holy Spirit encourages them so that they fear neither tyrants nor devils, and are not frightened even if they tore their heads from their shoulders. But in God's presence they fear and tremble like a rustling leaf. But, alas, I see the great mass of people are only concerned about continually hearing without understanding what is said, and when the time comes that they should give an answer, they stand like the pipers and can answer nothing. And thus we also go forth to execution. We must endure such assaults and factious spirits and cannot change it. Nevertheless, we may well comfort ourselves with the thought that we have the true foundation, that our cause is right and theirs wrong. This they also know well enough, and for this reason they can never be bold except among themselves, and there they may boast as long as they please.

19. But the kingdom of Christ consists in this and thereby grows, namely, that the conscience be comforted with the Word. What else takes place through works and laws, all pertains to our neighbour. For I need no works before God, and must only be careful rightly to confess my sins. Then I have forgiveness of sins and am one with God, all which the Holy Spirit works in me. Then I break forth with blessings toward my neighbour, as they did here who brought the man sick with the palsy to the Lord. Those were in the kingdom, or show who are in the kingdom, as the Evangelist says that the Lord had respect unto their faith. For had they not had any faith, they would not have brought the sick to the Lord. Faith precedes works, works follow faith. Therefore, because they are in the kingdom by faith, they bring in the sick man and thus do the work.

20. On this earth man lives not for the sake of works, in order that they may be profitable to him, for he is not in need of them. But if you do good works in order thereby to obtain and merit something from God, all is lost, and you have already fallen from this kingdom. But since you believe and continue to live you ought to know that you live for this very cause, namely, to carry in the sick man. God does not desire the Christian to live for himself. Yea, cursed is the life that lives for self. For all that one lives after he is a Christian, he lives for others. So these also do who bring in the sick man, they no longer live for themselves, but their lives serve others; yes, with their faith they win for the sick man a faith of his own. For this sick man had at first no faith, but after he heard the Word, Christ instills into him a faith of his own, and awakens him with the Gospel; as he is accustomed to instill faith by the Word.

21. Thus all works should be done, only to the end that we may see how they agree with the service for other people, to bring them to a true faith and lead them to Christ. If I tear down the pictures in churches that men may see a Christian is present, that is of no profit to the people, nor does it preach how to become free from sin; but he only desires praise, which does not lift up the consciences, and only makes the people gape, with ears, eyes and mouths wide open. It is a contemptible art to demolish pictures. But to know the kingdom of Christ that I or others may be benefited, this is well done. But you will not accomplish this even if you tear down all the churches, but only by hearing

the words: Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven; then by bringing others to God's Word.

22. The Word must be enforced, it must be beaten into men, here I must eat and drink, adorn and clothe myself, not that I may live, but that I may enforce the Word. For where the life of a Christian is not centered in the Word, it is not right. I am required to aid the conscience with the Word. I must give my neighbour meat and drink and do all I can for him in order to reach the chief thing, namely, to encourage the conscience, as they do here, who assist the sick man to recover his bodily health. And although it is a kindness or work to his body, nevertheless they so help him that his soul is also strengthened. Thus I feed the hungry, give the thirsty drink, clothe the naked, and the like. Yet I do this not only that he may eat and drink, but that I may secure the opportunity to tell him the Word, and thus also to bring him to Christ. These works are outside the kingdom, done to those who are not in the kingdom, in order to bring them into the kingdom.

23. Thus the Holy Spirit preaches, but the mad spirit of the separatists only desires to perform great wonders, to see and do miracles and signs. It is miracle enough that people learn by our preaching to know Christ and obtain a joyful conscience. Likewise, that I learned monachism, priestcraft, and everything belonging to popery to be nothing, is for me a great miracle. There is nothing in it when they make the charge that we perform no miracles. Although they do not shine so brightly and our ministers perform no miracles, as the Papists imagine they do, nevertheless, our light is pure and our knowledge correct. We surely preach the Gospel, and this they must of course conscientiously confess before each and every one, whether they desire to do so or not. So you have learned here that the kingdom of Christ and the Gospel are devoted to the end that you concentrate all your life, whether you be wife, child or husband, that you may be one who brings the sick to Christ, and thus be of assistance to others.

## II. THE FAITH OF OTHERS.

24. Now we should also consider a little the faith of others and the power to forgive sins, had we the time. I said before that it is an error to baptize the children into the faith of the church; men preached as though they were baptized without faith. This error enters among us by force at present, for the devil does not sleep. They think infants have no faith. The Pope with his subordinates has hitherto maintained that children have no faith, but are laid into the lap of the Christian church, and were baptized in the faith of universal Christendom. These new fanatics, like the Pope, also say that children have no faith; but that we should wait until they grow up.

25. We say that the faith of others does not assist unto salvation, even if double Christendom was present. The child must itself believe in Christ. For I have not been born in the place of the child or for the child, nor will I die in its stead, it has a death and birth of its own. If it is to live and become free from death, it must also come to this through faith in Christ. However, we pray for the children as well as for all unbelievers; and preach, pray and labour that the unbelieving and children may also come and believe; for this we also live.

26. So these people here had also faith, but not the man of the palsy. Yet, he must receive it if he is

to get well, otherwise their faith would not have helped him. They, however, in their faith prayed Christ to give the man sick of the palsy a faith of his own. So the faith of others assists to the end that I may obtain a faith of my own.

27. Yes, one might say: "How do we know whether children believe or not?" Neither do we know who among adults believe or who do not. If I be baptized as an adult and say: I believe; how can you know whether I believe or not? How do you know it? How, if I were to lie? No one else can know it, to this every one is brought by his own heart and thoughts; if it is right, it is right. The child cannot stand on my faith, I have scarcely enough faith for myself. Nor shall I lay it into the lap of Christendom, but into the Word of Christ where he says: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Mat. 19, 14. Luke 18, 15. And thus I shall say: "Here, O Christ, I bring a little child to thee, thou hast commanded me to bring it to thee." Now I have done my part, Christ will also certainly do his part. So I do not baptize the child in my own faith or in the faith of Christendom. But my faith and Christendom bring the child to baptism, in order that by rightly bringing it God may give it a faith of its own, that it may believe as I believe and be preserved in the same Word that Christ has given me. And I do not baptize the child on that it has no faith, as the Bohemians think, that when it grows up it shall then first obtain faith, and speak the Word of God over the child: Thy sins are forgiven thee; and yet it does not, as they hold, believe the words. Is not this to charge the Word of God as being false? Now to sum up: I can of course by my prayers and faith help another that he may also believe, but I cannot believe for him.

#### THE POWER ON EARTH TO FORGIVE SINS.

28. The Pharisees knew very well that to forgive sins was the work of God, and belonged to him alone. For this reason they regarded Christ as a blasphemer, who as a man pretended to forgive sins. The forgiveness of sin is of two kinds: The first is to drive sin from the heart and infuse grace into it; this is the work of God alone. The second kind is the declaration of the forgiveness of sin; this man can do to his fellowman. But here Christ does both. He instills the Spirit into the heart and externally he declares forgiveness with the word, which is a declaration and public preaching of the internal forgiveness.

29. All men who are Christians and have been baptized, have this power. For with this they praise Christ, and the word is put into their mouth, so that they may and are able to say, if they wish, and as often as it is necessary: Behold, O Man! God offers thee his grace, forgives thee all thy sins; be comforted, thy sins are forgiven; only believe and thou wilt surely have forgiveness. This word of consolation shall not cease among Christians until the last day: "Thy sins are forgiven, be of good cheer." Such language a Christian always uses and openly declares the forgiveness of sins. For this reason and in this manner a Christian has power to forgive sins.

30. Therefore if I say to you: Thy sins are forgiven, then believe it as surely as though God himself had said it to you. But who could do this if Christ had not descended, had not instructed me and said that we should forgive one another our trespasses? As when he says, John 20, 22-23: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained unto them." And at another place, Mat. 18, 19-20, he says: "If two of you

shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." The word penetrates and performs it.

31. Now if there were no man on earth to forgive sins, and there were only law and works what a weak, and miserable thing a poor troubled conscience would be. But now when God adequately instructs every one, so that he is able to say to others: Thy sins are forgiven thee, wherever thou art; the golden age has arrived. On this account we are to be defiant and boastful against sin, so that we can say to our brother, who is in anxiety and distress on account of his sins: Be of good cheer, my brother, thy sins are forgiven; although I cannot give thee the Holy Ghost and faith, I can yet declare them unto thee; if thou believest, thou hast them. They who thus believe these words, praise and glorify God, even as they do here in the Gospel. That is, God has given man power to forgive sins, and thus the kingdom of Christ is spread, the conscience is strengthened and comforted. This we do now through the Word. God grant that we may also thus understand it.

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