

Sermon for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Trinity; Matthew 18:23-35

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

THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT.

1. This Gospel or parable Christ our Lord spoke in reply to St. Peter, to whom he had just entrusted the keys to loose and to bind, Mat. 16, 19, when Peter asked him how often he should forgive his neighbour, whether seven times were enough? He answered: "Not seven times, but seventy times seven," and Christ then related this parable, and with it concludes, that our heavenly Father will do unto us, if we forgive not our neighbour, as this king did unto his servant, who would not forgive his fellow-servant a very small debt, after he had forgiven him so great a debt.

2. First, before we consider the Gospel itself, let us examine what kind of a rebuke it is, by which this servant's right is denied. For the other servant who owed him a hundred shillings, should according to justice have justly paid him this money. Even the first also had a good right to demand what was his own. If an appeal had been made to the public sentiment, every one would have been compelled to agree with him and say: It is just and right for him to pay what he owes. Why then this procedure, that his lord abolishes his claim, and besides condemns the servant because he demands and executes his right? Answer: It was thus written that we might know that it is altogether a different thing in the eye of God than it is in the eye of the world, and often that which is not right before God, is right and just before the world. For before the world this servant stands an honourable man; but before God he is called a wicked servant, and he is blamed for acting as one who is worthy of eternal condemnation.

3. It is therefore decreed when we deal with God that we must stand free, and let goods, honour, right, wrong, and every thing go that we have; and we will not be excused when we say: I am right, therefore I will not suffer a man to do me wrong, as God requires that we should renounce all our rights and forgive our neighbour. Concerning this, however, our high schools and the learned have preached and taught quite differently, that we are not obliged to give way to another and surrender our rights, but that it is just for every one to secure his dues. This is the first rebuff. Now let us consider this Gospel more fully.

4. We have often said that the Gospel or kingdom of God is nothing else than a state or government, in which there is nothing but forgiveness of sins. And wherever there is a state or government in which sins are not forgiven, no Gospel or kingdom of God is found there. Therefore we must clearly distinguish these two kingdoms from each other, in which sins are rebuked, and sins are forgiven, or in which our right is demanded, and our right is pardoned. In the kingdom of God, where God rules with the Gospel, there is no demand for right and dues, but all is pure forgiveness, pardon and giving, no anger, no punishment, but all is pure brotherly service and kindness.

5. By this, however, our civil rights are not abolished. For this parable teaches nothing of the kingdom

of this world, but only of the kingdom of God. Therefore, whoever is only under the civil government of the world, is far from the kingdom of heaven, for all this still belongs to perdition. As when a prince so rules his people as not to permit anyone to be wronged, and punishes the evil doer, does well and is praised. For thus it is in this government: Pay what thou owest, if not, you will be cast into prison. Such government we must have, but no one will thereby get to heaven, nor will the world be saved by it. But it is necessary for the reason that the world may not become worse, it is only a protection against and a prevention of wickedness. For if it were not for this government, one would devour the other, and no person could protect his life, goods, wife and child. So in order that everything may not go to ruin, God has instituted functions of the sword, by which wickedness may in part be prevented, so that the civil government may secure and maintain peace, and no one may wrong another. Therefore it must be tolerated. And yet as we have said, it has not been established for citizens of heaven, but simply in order that the people may not fall deeper into hell, and make matters worse. Therefore no one dare boast, who is under the civil government, that he therefore does right before God. Before him, all is yet wrong. For you must come to the point, that you also avoid what the world claims to be right.

6. The aim of this Gospel is to describe to us forgiveness for both parties. First the lord forgives the servant all his debt. Then he demands of him that he also in like manner forgive his fellow-servant and pardon his debt. This God demands, and thus his kingdom shall stand. Hence no one should be so wicked and allow himself to be so angry, as to be unable to forgive his neighbour. And, as is written, if he would even offend you seventy times seven times, that is, as often as he is able to offend you, you are to let your right and claim go, and freely give him everything. Why so? Because Christ has also done the same for you, in that he began and, established a kingdom in which there is nothing but grace, that is to endure forever, that every thing, as often as you sin, may be forgiven; because he has sent forth his Gospel, not to proclaim punishment, but grace alone. Now, because this government stands, you can at all times rise again, however deep and often you fall. For even if you fall, yet this Gospel and mercy-seat remain and stand forever; therefore as soon as you come and rise again, you again have grace. But he requires of you to forgive your neighbour whatever he has done against you, else you will neither be in this gracious kingdom nor enjoy the Gospel, that your sins may be forgiven. This in short is the idea and sense of this Gospel.

7. However, it is here not forgotten who those are who grasp and enjoy the Gospel. For it is indeed a glorious kingdom and a gracious government, because there is preached in it nothing but the forgiveness of sins, though it does not enter every one's heart. Hence there are many rude and vicious people who misuse the Gospel, who live a free life and do as they please, and think no one shall ever rebuke them, because the Gospel preaches nothing but the forgiveness of sins. To those the Gospel is not preached, who thus despise the great treasure and treat it wantonly; for this reason they do not belong to this kingdom, but only to the civil government, where they may be prevented from doing whatever they wish.

8. To whom then is the Gospel preached? To those who feel their distress as this servant does his. Therefore observe, how it is with him? The lord has compassion on his wretchedness, and gives him more than he could desire. But before this is done, the text says that the lord would make a reckoning with his servants; and as he began to reckon this one appeared before him, who owed him ten thousand talents; but as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. This was indeed no cheering sermon, nothing but great earnestness, and the most terrible sentence. Now he becomes so uneasy that he falls down and

pleads for grace, and promises more than he has and can pay, and says: "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all." Here are pictured and set forth those who enjoy the Gospel in its full measure.

9. For thus it is between God and us. When God wishes to reckon with us, he sends forth the preaching of the law, by which we learn to know what we owe. As when God says to the conscience: "Thou shalt have no other gods," but esteem me only as God and love me with all thy heart, and trust in me alone; this is the reckoning and the register, in which is written what we owe, this he takes in hand and reads to us and says: Do you see what you are required to do? You are to fear, love and honour me alone, and trust only in me, and hope in me for the best. But you do the contrary and are my enemy, you do not believe in me, but put your trust in other things. To sum up, you see here you do not keep a single letter of the Law.

10. Now when the conscience hears such things, and the Law thoroughly comes at us, then we see our duty, and that we have not done it, and we perceive that we have not kept a letter of it, and must confess we have not believed or loved God a single moment. What now will the Lord do? When the conscience is thus led captive and confesses that it must be lost, and becomes anxious and fearful, he says: Sell him and all he has, that payment may be made. This is the sentence which immediately follows, when the Law reveals sins and says: This thou shouldst do and have done, but thou hast not done it. For punishment follows sin, that payment may be made. For God has not given his Law to the end to allow those to escape who disobey it. It is not sweet nor friendly, but brings with it bitter, horrible punishment, and delivers us to Satan, casts us into hell, and leaves us in punishment until we have paid the uttermost farthing. This St. Paul has correctly explained to the Romans, 4, 15: "For the Law worketh wrath." That is, when it reveals to us that we have done wrong, it brings home to our hearts nothing but his wrath and displeasure. For when the conscience sees it has done wrong, it feels that it is worthy of eternal death; and if punishment would soon follow, it would have to despair. This is meant, when the lord commands this servant to be sold with all he has, because he cannot make payment.

11. What does the servant do now? He foolishly goes to work and thinks he will still pay the debt, falls down and asks the lord to have patience with him. This is the torment of all consciences, when sin comes and smarts deeply until they feel in what a sad state they are before God; then they have no rest, run hither and thither, seek help here and there, to become free from sin, and in their presumption think they can do enough to pay God in full. As we have been taught hitherto; from which also have come so many pilgrimages, charitable foundations, cloisters, masses and other nonsense; so we fasted and scourged ourselves, and became monks and nuns. And all this came because we undertook to begin a life and to do many works of which God should take account and allow himself to be paid by them, and had thought to quiet and put the conscience at peace with God; and so we have acted just like this fool in today's lesson.

12. Now a heart that is thus smitten with the Law, and feels its blows and distress, is truly humiliated. Therefore it falls before the Lord and asks for grace, except that it still makes the mistake that it will help itself; for this we cannot root out of our nature. When the conscience feels such misery, it dare promise more than all the angels in heaven are able to do. Here one can easily promise and bind himself to do every thing that may be required of him; for he finds himself at all times thus prepared, that he still hopes to do enough for his sin by means of his good works.

13. Now behold the things men were guilty of heretofore in the world's history, and you will find it so. Then men preached: Give to the church, run into the cloister, establish many masses, and then your sins will be forgiven. And when they forced our consciences in the confessional, we did everything they imposed upon us, and gave more than they demanded of us. What should the poor people do? They were glad to be helped in this manner; therefore they ran and martyred themselves to get rid of their sins; and yet it did no good whatever, for the conscience remained in doubt as before, so that it did not know on what terms it stood with God; or if it were secure; it became still worse and fell into the presumption, that God had to regard their works. Reason cannot let this alone nor get around it, so as to abandon it.

14. Hence the Lord comes and sympathizes with this distress, because the servant thus lies captive and bound in his sins, and in addition to this is such a fool as to want to help himself, looks for no mercy, knows nothing to say of grace, and feels nothing but sins, which press him heavily, and knows no one to help him. Then his lord has mercy on him and sets him free.

15. Here is represented to us the Gospel and its nature, and how God deals with us. When you are thus held fast in sins and you torment yourself to become free from them, the Gospel comes and says: "No, not so, my dear friend, it will do no good for you to torture and torment yourself to madness; your works accomplish nothing, but God's mercy does it all; he has compassion on your affliction, and sees you a captive in such anguish, struggling in the mire and that cannot help yourself out, he sees that you cannot pay the debt, therefore he forgives you all." Hence it is nothing but pure mercy. For he forgives you the debt, not because of your works and merit, but because he pities your cries, complaints and humiliation. This means that God has regard for an humble heart, as the Prophet David says in Psalm 51, 19: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." Such a heart, he says, is broken and cast down and cannot help itself, and is glad when God gives it a helping hand; this is the best Sacrifice before God, and the true way to heaven.

16. Now this follows out of mercy; because God pities our distress, he yields his claims and nullifies them and never says: Sell what you have and make payment. He might well have proceeded and said: You must pay, I have the right to demand it, I will not on your account annul my own right, and no one could have blamed him. Yet, he does not wish to deal with him according to our ideas of right, but changes justice into grace, has mercy on him, and gives him liberty, with wife and child and everything he has, and makes him a present of the debt besides. This is what God preaches through the Gospel, namely: He who believes, to him not only the debt, but also the punishment shall be remitted. To this no works are to be added; for whoever preaches that through his works one can atone for his debt and punishment, has already denied the Gospel. For the two can not be tolerated together, that God should have mercy, and that you should have any merit. If it is grace, then it is not merit: but if it is merit, then it is justice and no grace. Rom. 11, 6. For if you pay what you owe, he shows you no mercy; but if he shows mercy, you do not pay for what you receive. Therefore we must leave him alone to deal with us, receive from him and believe. This is what today's Gospel teaches.

17. Now you see, since this servant is thus humbled through the knowledge of his sins, that the Word ministers very strong comfort to him, when the Lord declares him free, and remits him both the debt and the punishment. By this is indicated that the Gospel does not reach vicious hearts, nor those who walk forth impudently, but only troubled consciences whose sins oppress them, from which they desire to be free; on these God will have mercy and bestow upon them all things.

18. Thus this servant now received the Word, and thereby became God's friend. For if he had not received the Word, it would have done him no good, and forgiveness would have amounted to nothing. Therefore it is not enough that God has the forgiveness of sins offered to us, and has proclaimed the golden year of the kingdom of grace; but it must also be grasped and believed. If you believe it, then you are free from sin, and all is right. Now this is the first part of a Christian life, taught by this and all the Gospels, which properly consists in faith, that deals only with God. Besides it is also indicated that we cannot, grasp the Gospel, unless there be present first a conscience that is afflicted and miserable because of sin.

19. Now conclude from this that it is nothing but deception that is preached in relation to our works and free will, and if a different way to blot out sin and obtain grace is taught, than this Gospel here advocates, namely, that the divine Majesty looks upon our wretchedness and has mercy upon us. For the text says clearly, that he presents and remits to those who have nothing; and thus concludes that we have nothing wherewith to remunerate God. So you may have free will as you wish in temporal things, in outward life and character, or in outward piety and virtue, as man can have in his own strength, yet you hear now that it is nothing before God. What can free will do here? There is nothing in it at any rate but struggling and trembling. Therefore, if you would be free from sin, you must desist from and despair in all your own works, and cling to the cross and plead for grace, and then lay hold of the Gospel by faith.

20. Now follows the second part of this parable, that of the fellow-servant. We would gladly die every hour for the sake of our faith. For this servant has enough, he retains his life and goods, wife and child and has a gracious lord; so he would be a great fool if he would now go and do everything he could to obtain a gracious lord. His lord might then well say, he only mocks me. Therefore, he dare not add any work, but only receives the grace offered him, be joyful and thank the Lord, and do unto others as the Lord did to him.

21. Thus it is now with us. If we believe, then we have a gracious God, and need no more, and it would indeed be well for us to die soon. But if we are to live on earth, our life must not be devoted to obtain God's favour by means of our works; for he who does this mocks and blasphemes God. As men hitherto have taught, that we must so long lie at God's ears with our good works, praying, fasting and the like, until we obtain grace. Grace we have already received, not through our works but through God's mercy. If you are to live, you must have something to do and work at, and all this must be devoted to your neighbour, says Christ.

22. But that servant went out. How does he go out? Where has he been within? He had been in faith, but now he goes out through love, by which he is to show himself to the people. For faith leads the people from the people unto God, but love leads out unto the people. Previously he was within, between God and himself alone, for no one can see or vouch for faith, how both Work together. Therefore one must needs go out of the eyes of the people, where no one is seen or felt but God; this is transacted alone through faith, and no external work can be added to it. Now he comes out before his neighbour. If he had remained within, he could well have died; but he must come out and live among other people and mingle with them. Here he finds a fellow servant whom he strikes and beats, and throttles him, demands payment and shows no mercy.

23. This is what we have often said, that we Christians must break forth, and show by our deeds and

before the people that we have the true faith. God does not need your works, he has enough in your faith. Yet he wants you to work that you may show thereby your faith to yourself and all the world. For God indeed sees faith, but you and the people do not yet see it, therefore you should devote the works of faith to the benefit of your neighbour. Thus this servant is an example and picture of all those who should serve their neighbour through faith.

24. But what does he do? Just as we who think we believe, and partly do believe, and rejoice that we have heard the Gospel and can say a great deal about it; but no one wants to follow it in his life. We have brought matters so far, that the doctrine and jugglery of the devil have been partly overthrown, and we now see what is right and what is wrong, that we must deal with God alone through faith, but with our neighbour through our works. But we cannot bring it to pass, that, as to love, one does to another as God has done to him; as we ourselves complain that some of us have become much worse than they were before.

25. As this servant will not forgive his neighbour, but seeks to collect his claim; so we also do and say: I am not in duty bound to give what is my own to another, and yield my rights. If another has offended me, he owes it to me to reconcile me and ask pardon. For thus the world teaches and acts. And here you are right, and no prince or king will compel you to give to another what is your own; but they must permit you to do what you wish with your own. The civil government only compels so far, that you may not do with another's goods what you would, not that you must give your goods to another. This is right before the world, as reason concludes: To every one belongs his own. Therefore, he does not do wrong, who uses his goods as he will, and robs no one of his own.

26. But what says this Gospel? If God also would have acted thus and had maintained his right and said: I act in harmony with justice, when I punish the wicked and take what is my own, who will prevent me? where then would we all be? We would all go to ruin. Therefore, because he has given up his claim on thee, he desires that you too should do likewise. Therefore, also give up your right and think: If God has given me ten thousand pounds, why should I not give my neighbour a hundred shillings?

27. Thus your goods are no longer your own, but your neighbour's. God could indeed have kept his own, for he owed you nothing. Yet he gives himself wholly unto you, becomes your gracious Lord, is kind to you, and serves you with all his goods, and what he has is all yours; why then will you not also do likewise? Hence, if you wish to be in his kingdom you must do as he does; but if you want to remain in the kingdom of the world, you will not enter his kingdom. Therefore the sentence in Mat. 25, 42, which Christ will speak on the last day belongs to those who are not Christians: "For I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink," and so on.

28. But you say: Do you still insist that God will have no regard for our good works, and on their account will save no one? Answer: He would have them done freely without any thought of remuneration; not that we thereby obtain something, but that we do them to our neighbour, and thereby show that we have the true faith; for what have you then that you gave him and by which you merit anything, that he should have mercy on you and forgive you all things that you have done against him? Or what profit has he by it? Nothing has he, but that you praise and thank him, and do as he has done, that God may be thanked in thee, then you are in his kingdom and have all things that you should have. This is the other part of the Christian life, which is called love, by which one goes out from God to his

neighbour.

29. Those who do not prove their faith by their works of love are servants who want others to forgive them, but do not forgive their neighbour, nor yield their rights; hence it will also be with them as with this servant. For when the other servants, who preach the Gospel, see that God has freely given them all things, and they refuse to forgive anyone, they become sad to see such things, and they are pained, that they act so foolishly toward the Gospel, and no one lays hold of it. What do they do then? They can do no more than come before their Lord with their complaint and say: So it goes; you forgive them both the debt and the punishment, and freely give them all things; but we cannot prevail upon them to do to others as you have done to them. This is the complaint. Then God will summon them to appear before him at the last judgment and accuse them of these things and say: When you were hungry, thirsty and afflicted, I helped you; when you lay in sins I had compassion upon you and forgave the debt; therefore you must also now pay your debt. There is now no grace nor mercy, nothing but wrath and eternal punishment, no prayers will help from now on, and they become speechless, and are cast into torment until they pay the uttermost farthing.

30. St. Peter said the same of those who heard the Gospel and again fell away. 2 Pet. 2, 21: "For it were better for them, not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered unto them." Why would it be better? Because if they turn back it will be twofold worse with them, than it was before they had heard the Gospel; as Christ says in Mat. 12, 45, of the unclean spirit, who takes unto himself seven other spirits worse than himself, comes with them and dwells in the man out of whom they were cast, and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.

31. Thus it is now with us also, and it will be still more so. So it also was with Rome. There things were in a fine condition in the days of the martyrs. But afterwards they went to ruin, and abominations arose and Antichrist ruled, and the city became so wicked that it could not be worse. The grace of God preached through the Gospel is so great that the people do not grasp it, therefore great and terrible punishment must also follow. Thus we will see just punishment come upon us, inasmuch as we do not obey the Gospel we have and know.

32. For as often as God has afflicted the people with severe punishment, he previously set up a great light; as when he led the Jews out of their country into captivity, he first brought forth the pious king Josiah, who again restored the law in order to reform the people; but when they again fell away, God punished them as they deserved. So also when he wished to overthrow the Egyptians, he sent Moses and Aaron to preach and enlighten them, Ex. 4, 14. Again, when he wished to destroy the world with the flood, he raised up the patriarch Noah, Gen. 6, and 7. But when the people would not believe and only grew worse, terrible punishment followed. So it was with the five cities; Sodom and Gomorrah with the rest were punished, because they would not hear pious Lot, Gen. 19.

Therefore such terrible punishments will also now come upon those who hear the Gospel and do not receive it. So this servant in the Gospel is cast off, and must pay what he owes. This means, that he must endure the pain and consequences. But he who endures the pain for the debt, will never be saved. For to sin belongs death, and when one dies he dies forever, and there is no more help nor salvation for him. Therefore let us receive these things as a warning; those, however, who are hardened and will not hear,

will guard against it.

33. This is an elegant, comfortable Gospel, and is sweet to the afflicted conscience, because it contains nothing but forgiveness of sins. But for stubborn heads and hardened hearts it is a terrible sentence, and particularly so because this servant is not a heathen, but belongs to those under the Gospel, who held the faith. For as the Lord has mercy on him and forgives him what he had done, he must without doubt be a Christian. Hence this is not a punishment for the heathen, neither for the common crowd who hear the Gospel with the external ear, and have it on their tongue, but do not live according to it. Thus we have the sum of this Gospel.

34. What further the sophists are accustomed here to discuss, whether the sins will come back that were once forgiven, I let pass. For they do not know what forgiveness of sin is, and think it is something that sticks in the heart and lies still there, whereas it is the whole kingdom of Christ, which lasts forever without end. For as the sun shines and gives light none the less, although I close my eyes, so this mercy seat or forgiveness of sins stands forever, though I fall. And as I see the sun again as soon as I open my eyes, so I have the forgiveness of sins again when I look up and again come to Christ. Therefore we must not make forgiveness so narrow, as the fools dream. This is said on today's Gospel.

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