

SERMON

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 23:1–12 · 1945

12 August 1945

Valdemarsvik Church

Text: Matthew 23:1–12

Hymns: 279:1–2; 260:1–5; 426:3; 402:1–4; 241:3

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray.

O Christ, be gracious to us,

so that in faith we may

behold light in your truth,

receive life from your love.

To you our heart longs.

From the world's vanity it yearns

to your righteousness. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 50:3)

“He who is greatest among you, let him be the servant of the others.” So the Lord in our text sums up his demand on the disciples. This servant-mind is set forth as a contrast to the selfishness of the scribes and the Pharisees. Christ wants to teach us to recognize love. Today it is to us that the Savior directs his speech about selfishness and the servant-mind. Let us open our hearts and seek to understand the word of Jesus.

The whole world and all people are God's property and God's creation. He is the Father, who daily gives life and health and sustenance to us all. Our fellow human beings receive exactly the same gifts out of God's hands as we, and it is God's will that we all shall be brothers, siblings. "All are our brothers, who on earth dwell and build." "One is your Father, he who is in heaven," Jesus says in the text. But in this human race, which is formed of one blood, the devil rules, the evil will, which in us all without exception drives selfish thoughts forward in the heart. The spirit of the world in a person speaks thus: I want to live, I want to rise upward, I want to manage against the others, who in their turn strive to manage themselves against me. This evil spirit can take possession of everything, even the religious life. "They make their prayer-straps broad... they like to sit foremost in the synagogue... all their works they do in order to be seen by people" — so the Lord speaks of the religious people of his time. Even in piety the inmost wish of the human being can be to assert himself. Therefore Jesus' word that we shall serve the other people, Jesus' command to service of the neighbor, is something which must always go against the world, and because we have the spirit of the world inside ourselves, Jesus' word goes against us. The holy word meets a resistance inside us, and it begets a strife in our life, a strife between selfishness and the servant-mind, which goes on until our death. The Lord takes hold of our wish to be great: "He who is greatest among you, he will be the servant of the others," that is, he sets the others foremost, he lets the others be greatest. We never become finished with that word. It points continually over from ourselves to our neighbor. But it also wakens a strange joy in us, this, to be allowed to be a servant. We are created for it. The Creator has pressed that determination into us, and our only possibility of true joy lies in our becoming servants — just as Jesus Christ, God's own Son, commands us.

There is no one in here who has not at some time met such a serving person. Serving people are in all groups of society, as also selfish ones, among high and low. (This life I have received in order to live for others: the serving one, the king. This life I shall have for my own part: the egoist.) Those who in their walk are real servants of others live in the middle of the press, often quite far from people's praise and commendation. Courtesy flows more often to meet those who are not servants, but who use their power and their money to rule with. But there is a prince whom no one escapes, and who can turn everything upside down, and that prince is called death. "We brought hither no goods and gold, no worldliness and honor, and down into the grave's silent mold we bear nothing with us." A person who has striven after his own gain all his days gathers in what passes away and nothingness. Death inexorably makes an end of everything. At the bier of a serving person one feels instead that precisely his life had

meaning. He got to live his earthly life for others, a servant-life. Now he is gone from us, but in our blessings over his life there already lies a surmise that he has only left a poor world in order to enter a rich and eternal, imperishable and new existence. “He who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted,” Jesus says in our text. Those words are sometimes confirmed already in earthly life. An honor won in selfishness never lasts long, and the final commendation is as a rule given to him who has not hunted after it, but instead done his duty. But as the words of the text stand there, they aim nevertheless nearest at the eternal life in the world of the resurrection: he who here exalts himself shall in the judgment be humbled, and he who here humbles himself shall in God’s last judgment be exalted.

The selfish one lives only for this short life, and death crushes him. He who serves lives the divine life already here in time, for “God is love.” Over God, over love, death has no power. Therefore selfishness always brings unrest, anxiety. One strives after something that can be lost. Therefore the servant-mind always brings peace, inward rest and security. He who has set his goal to serve, to live in service for others, that person can hardly lose his ground of life in any thinkable situation. He is anchored in God, the eternal, he who is the inexhaustible spring of all love on the whole earth in all ages. Selfishness has only this life. The servant-mind has the eternal life.

That difference between selfishness and the servant-mind comes out most plainly in Christ himself. He said of his own commission from the Father: “I have not come in order to rule, but in order to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.” “A servant of servants came, the Lord of all lords.” As there is a struggle in our heart between selfishness on the one side and the servant-mind on the other, so there also raged around the Savior a struggle between the Father’s commission and the powers of temptation. In the wilderness Jesus was exposed to three temptations, and all three meant the same. The devil whispered: “Use your power for your own gain, for riches, honor, and lordship over the kingdoms of the earth — do not become a servant, but a ruler.” But Christ stood his test. The way of serving dropped down toward Golgotha, and he went — in anguish, but still freely — where the way led. Peter sought indeed to lure him aside: “By no means shall this befall you, Lord.” Under the mask of friendship Jesus even then saw the same old devilish temptation hidden, and he answered his disciple: “Go away, Satan, and do not stand in my way.” Our Master has not only given us a commandment about serving. He has also with his own blood and his own anguish himself fulfilled his commandment, even into the death of the cross. He who complains that Christianity preaches too much about our sin shows thereby that he has not thought over

what Jesus' demand means, and has not set himself before Christ's carrying out of the servant's act to the uttermost, to the shameful criminal's death on the hill of the gallows. At the cross of Christ one sees that one is a sinner — as Paul in today's epistle ("I wretched man") and as the tax collector in today's gospel. The true righteousness is the righteousness of Christ, not our own.

In the outward course of events it is the power-strivings hungry to rule, the Pharisees and the scribes, who conquer on Golgotha — but there one can palpably mark that selfishness has only a short life. He who conquered, conquered for the eternal future. It was he, the Servant, who on the Place of the Skull was executed. The long time is his. No power in history can root out the power of his Spirit in human souls, and on the last day he is the Judge over us all. It is fruitless to try to escape him. Our text-words have literal validity: "One is your teacher, Christ." His cross is the reality of the servant-mind set in the middle of the reality of selfishness. So handfast and clear is the serving set by God on earth, that no one can say he lives under worse outward conditions than Jesus of Nazareth. No one can dispute Christ's authority to command us to the servant-life. And for this life we are created. In our being there is a cry which we can never choke, a longing to be allowed to benefit others. It is God's eternal determination over all that is called human: "Serve your fellow human beings." Christ has in the hard, earthly life to the last remainder fulfilled this commandment. Therefore he is — whether we wish it or not — Lord over our consciences.

In our heart this struggle now goes on between the servant-mind and selfishness, that is, between God and the devil, for it is the same. As we have the same sun, the same moon, that Christ had, so we have the same God and the same devil. To be a human being is to stand between these two powers. We cannot "break with sin," as one says, once for all, and then live on the "conversion." If "sin" were visits to the cinema and cigarette smoking, then that method would work finely. But now Christ's demand is the servant-mind, and sin is selfishness. Even in the most religious area of our life selfishness can enter, and we can do good acts toward others and receive commendation in ample phrases for our willingness to serve — but we ourselves know quite often that we are precisely like the Pharisees in the heart. Our acts we do "in order to be seen by people." So long as we eagerly ask after recognition, so long as we become upset that the recognition fails to come, so long it is poor with our servant-mind. To "humble oneself" is not to bow the back. It is precisely to let go the demand for people's recognition, in willingness to be a simple servant. "One does not thank the servant because he did what was commanded him," Christ says in one place (Luke 17), and that word belongs in

our connection. To “exalt oneself” is the unwillingness to set oneself in the servant’s place, and the continual attempts on our side to make ourselves lords, to make ourselves lords perhaps best of all through our services toward others. Each day we need to test ourselves, before the word of God, strictly and factually. “He who humbles himself shall be exalted, but he who exalts himself shall be humbled” — with this word both today’s gospel, which is read from the altar, and our preaching text are closed. That word wants today to press into our inmost part and mark our decisions in the everyday life which waits for us out there outside the church walls. You know best yourself your work and your home. If you will let that word shine into your life, you will surely become aware of what it means — how the word as it were drives a servant-life forward and blocks the way for a ruler-life. The sign that this word of Christ is at work in us, the sign is this: that we feel how our self-will is broken, and how regard for the others, love of the neighbor, gets to determine something also in our outward everyday life of action. If this does not happen, we are outside the word’s circle of effect. But if this breaking of our selfishness is allowed to happen, then we also understand two other words of the Lord Jesus. First this: “He who wins his life shall lose it, but he who loses his life shall win it.” And another, short word: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

If we live a life in service to others, then we are in fellowship with Christ. When we bear another person’s burden, then the Lord goes unseen at our side. We shall indeed mark that even the best act can as it were be soiled by this, that we become proud and self-righteous over it. In the outward the act is good and cannot be made otherwise, but our heart is unclean. Even in such an unclean heart Christ wants to dwell. Yes, he wants to dwell precisely in the sinner’s heart. For his being is the will to serve. As a servant he came to tax collectors and sinners once. As a servant he comes today to us in his word and his Supper. We need only open the door, so that he may come in to us and serve us. The door we open by believing and praying.

Lord, we believe only in you, for you are the only one who only wants to serve — all others want to rule. Come and break down our selfishness. Come and make us simple servants. Amen.

Translator’s notes. He gave this sermon no title. The second citation of the chief word is given as he wrote it there, “he will be,” not smoothed back to “let him be.” Cinema visits and cigarette smoking are his example of a false notion of sin, and are left. The serving person stays he. “Ära” in the grave-verse is honor. The hymn lines are for sense, not meter.

