

SERMON

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 22:34–46 · 1943

24 October 1943

Motala Church

Text: Matthew 22:34–46

Hymns: 238:1–2; 174:9–14; 395:1; 179:2–3; 45:8

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

Let us pray.

Come near us, God of zeal;

come near us in judgment.

As the clear voice of conscience

fills our breast with gnawing unrest,

come near us in judgment.

And when the scourges of conscience strike,

bear witness then with our spirit

that we are God's children still

here in the land of darkness:

come near us to save. Amen.

Sometimes when we come to church or open the Bible, we meet nothing but commands and strictness. For a Christian it is a matter of doing something, of obeying — think of Jesus'

Sermon on the Mount. But another time the pure gospel is preached, and we are told carefully: here you must not come with any works; here only grace and Jesus' atonement count. How is one to understand this? Christ's relation to the law is twofold. He sharpens it, and he sets us free from it. Today we have occasion to consider both sides.

The first part of today's Gospel text is about the law: Jesus answers the question about the greatest commandment in the law. The second part is about the Messiah — that is, about Christ, and Christ's own position as the one who fulfills the law and is its Lord. So let us gather our thoughts around Christ and the law.

In answer to the lawyer's question, the Lord Jesus names the two commandments in which the whole law of Moses can be summed up. First: you shall love God. Second: you shall love your neighbor. A person's life is to be God-fearing and upright, so that neither God's honor nor the neighbor's welfare is violated. But if one lives like that, what is Christ for? If one goes to church and keeps all the pious customs, and if one is a blameless citizen and also really helpful to one's fellow human beings, then it seems very strange that all works should suddenly be declared wholly useless.

We must look a little more closely at how the Master sums up the law. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." The whole heart is to be in it, without compulsion. And the next sentence means exactly the same thing: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." You know how easily and quickly resentment springs up in you when you hear that someone has slandered you and told lies about you. That is how you love yourself — "with all your heart and with all your soul." You truly need not make an effort to look after your own rights. Luther, in his plain and hearty way, has taught us best how to understand the double commandment of love. "Do you want to know how much you must love God and your neighbor to truly fulfill this commandment? Then look at the miser, how he loves his money. He thinks of it day and night, and he cannot subdue his love of riches even if he wanted to." He loves "with all his heart and with all his soul" — "as himself."

One can haggle this commandment down and try instead to achieve a moderate love of God and neighbor. Whoever does that cannot be accused here, in civil life, of doing too little. On the contrary, he does more than most, more than the great crowd. But all the same he arbitrarily and high-handedly marks God's commandment down to a reasonable measure, by his own reasoning. He will notice that he feels no joy over Christ's work of salvation, no humility or warm thankfulness at the words of grace when they meet him in the service or

from the page of the Bible. He thinks all this is unnecessary, and more than a little exaggerated — all this talk about Christ and salvation. For the person who haggles down God's commandment — who haggles down the law as it is actually given us in Jesus' strict interpretation of it — is fleeing from God's reality. He stops his ears to God's speaking. He censures God's word and throws it out. He twists himself out of God's grip on him. Then everything God does becomes foreign to him too. It seems to him incomprehensible and meaningless. God's word is far from him. And the fact is that the real, true God reveals himself in Christ and acts in the whole of Christ's life, from the manger to the cross — and most mightily of all in the cross, the cross and the resurrection. Whoever has twisted himself out of the immeasurable demand of the strict commandment of love, and so fled from God, has also made himself a stranger to Christ.

He probably also senses that he must go on carrying his old sins himself, and that he never gets free of his burden of guilt. All the talk about the forgiveness of sins does not reach the bottom of his heart. For the God who forgives sins is the same God who commands unselfish love “with all the heart and with all the soul and with all the mind.” If one will not have God as he is, as he appears in his holy word, but wants instead a more reasonable God, made to human measure, one may have that — one may have one's imagined God. But then, of course, one must also resign oneself to having a God without strength, without power to help in need, without the ability to lift sins off one's anxious conscience — a God who exists in one's thoughts but not in reality.

But if we take God in earnest in his law, as Jesus interprets that law in today's text, it does not mean first of all that we become ever so much better in our life together on earth than the moderate, civilly blameless man whose picture we just looked at. It does mean this as well: there will be greater conscientiousness in things great and small, and above all a different attitude toward opponents and enemies. But that is not the essential thing. The essential thing is this. If we take the commandment of love in earnest, without restriction, as demanding the free devotion of the whole heart, without compulsion, with delight and joy — if we take it that seriously, just as it stands — then we grasp that we are always sinners. We are sinners even when we do what is good and right and righteous.

You see, the blameless and sensible man we just described did not understand this. He had committed sins, to be sure; he knew that. There was that half-dishonest business deal in 1918, and that lie last year. He “had sins,” he had bad habits. But he was not a sinner through and

through, without righteousness, empty-handed and helpless before God. But this talk about sin we do understand now, when we take God's commandment in earnest, the law in earnest. There is nothing soft or wretched in this old talk, which the men and heroes of Christian history have carried on their lips — men who risked their lives, and who feared God, to be sure, but not any man on earth. No, the talk about sin need not be carried on by cowardly weaklings. It rests on cold reality, and it tells the simple truth about man before God. Here on earth he strives to obey the law, to live righteously and to be of use to others. But his heart, left to itself, seeks only its own. His good and righteous deeds are not seldom done in real struggle against his heart. We have to fight against ourselves if we are to keep on doing what is good and upright and holy. And when we have done it, and really sacrificed something of ourselves for a good cause, our perverse heart creeps out of its hole again and suns itself in the glow of our good deeds. Can we do anything good without wishing that someone, at least, will know about it and admire us and talk about it — while we ourselves keep quiet about it, humble and fine?

This heart, the old self in us, God judges. He sees right through our surface. He is never moved by beautiful facades. He looks into the most secret corners of the soul and lays bare my inner self. He points to the root of selfishness from which all the outward sins in us grow: our sudden anger when something goes against us, our impatience with unpleasant people, and our fine little slander behind the backs of those who are doing better in life than we are. This inner sin and impurity of ours lasts until our last hour, though it changes its clothes. We do not get rid of sin. We have it in our very bodies when we fill out our tax returns honestly, when we give money to the victims of the war, when we go forward to the Communion table, when we open the Bible or bow our heads in prayer. The judgment of conscience accuses us. Our righteousness holds before people, who cannot see deeply and never set the truly high demands. But it does not hold before God. At the last judgment all our own righteousness will fall hopelessly short.

Now Christ appears in another light. Before, with our moderate, haggled-down law, we thought ourselves fairly righteous. The talk about Christ and about grace was an incomprehensible exaggeration. We perhaps thought of Christ mostly as an unusually advanced human being — one of us, from below, fit to be an example, but not a Savior. We probably thought roughly as all Pharisees in all ages have thought.

The second half of today's Gospel shows us the Pharisees' thoughts about the Messiah. This part of the text is obscure and needs to be explained verse by verse — do open the Gospel for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity. First the background. The background to this whole conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees is the Jewish hope that David's kingdom would be restored. David's reign was the Jews' time as a great power. In many circles in Jesus' day the hope was alive that the Messiah, when he came, would break the rule of the Romans and restore Israel to national and political independence. So David was in a way thought of as superior to the coming Messiah: the Messiah would only lead things back to the state they were in under David. The Lord Christ wanted to destroy this shallow idea of God's will.

And now the text. That is why he points to the 110th psalm of the Psalter, which is headed as a psalm of David himself. The first verse of this psalm, where David is speaking, begins: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand.'" Everyone knew that this means: God, the Lord of hosts, said to the Messiah, "Sit at my right hand." David calls his God "the Lord," and he calls the Messiah "my Lord." How then can you claim, Jesus means, how can you claim that the Messiah will only be David's son — and so subordinate to David — when David himself, in the 110th psalm, looks up to the Messiah and calls him "his Lord"? The Messiah, Christ, stands far above David and his earthly kingdom of glory. He is God's Son, sent from heaven to earth — to the whole earth, to all people — to be "a Savior for all." "Jerusalem is desolate, its temple fallen down... but Christ's kingdom endures" — today, now, across all wars and all national borders. And when the Lord Christ brings something other than the restoration of the Jewish kingdom, that also means he gives something other than the law of Moses, something other than bare commandments. His message is the gospel: the forgiveness of sins, God's mercy and grace toward sinful people on earth. Christ is not from below, but from above. The law was given on Sinai, but now we turn "from Sinai to Golgotha." In Christ's death and resurrection God broke through the chain of sin with his new deed and gift. Christ gives something other than the law.

Let us remember man's situation under the law, once he has really taken it in earnest and understood that God demands love "with all the heart and all the soul." He stood under the judgment of conscience even when he was outwardly God-fearing and upright, and he had to tremble at the thought of meeting, at the last judgment, the God whose laws are so strict. Whoever takes God's law in earnest lives in God's reality. And it was the real God who drove Christ to his death. This has happened here on earth. Christ felt anguish on his cross and suffered death there. But here on earth he has also burst the chains of death and risen from his

grave, to live near us until the judgment, in his church, in the preaching of the word, in baptism and Communion. When a person stands under God's hard law, which demands everything, he begins to sense the secret of the cross. If the law is to be fulfilled to the last, it must go as it went with Christ at the end. But who has the strength for such a law, except the one who suffers the death of the cross in the midst of his unbroken holiness — and who therefore can never again be held captive by death, but is Lord and has power for ages without end: power to give peace, freedom, a holy spirit, and love for the neighbor, but above all power to forgive sins? There is one righteousness that holds right into the last judgment, and that righteousness is the forgiveness of sins. That righteousness is Christ's righteousness, which he gives you — for nothing.

Conclusion. We asked at the beginning how we are to understand that Christianity is sometimes demand and sometimes grace — how we are to unite the gospel and the law. They cannot be united. They are two things. The law is God's left hand, and the gospel is God's right hand. Up with God they belong together, but down here they are two. Through both of them God takes hold of us and holds us near himself. If we run away from either of the two, we lose the other as well. But if we let the law be as strict as it is, the gospel will also be as rich as it is.

But if law and gospel cannot be united into one, both of these separate words from God can still meet us from the same mouth. We have seen that both of them — both God's mercy and God's strictness — are greatest in Jesus Christ. It was he who gave the double commandment of love the strict interpretation before which all our strength fell short. It was he who, in suffering and death, fought the gentle gospel into the world. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Over all the texts today stands the heading "The Way to the Kingdom of God." Jesus said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Amen.

Translator's notes. The typescript underlines heavily for stress; the underlining is not reproduced. "När vi deklarerar rätt" means filing one's tax return honestly and is rendered that way. "Helig ande" in the list of Christ's gifts is written in lower case in the typescript, and is given as "a holy spirit" to keep that. "Pruta" is rendered "haggle down." The opening hymn is not numbered in the typescript and is translated for sense, not as metrical verse.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·