

SERMON

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 22:34–46 · 1940

22 September 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Matthew 22:34–46

Hymns: 259:3–4; 295:1–4; 206:4; 179:1–3; 43:7

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

Let us pray.

You holy fire, all the world's comfort,

let love burn in our breast.

Give us of your good consolation,

in earthly need a heavenly courage.

On the way of the cross strengthen and lead us.

Against temptation prepare us with power,

that here we may fight manfully

and through death go to life.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 134:3)

“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” These words, directed to frail and mortal human beings, have really been spoken by Jesus, the Master. And the Eighteenth Sunday after

Trinity now wants to instruct us about “the way of perfection,” as we can see from the gospel book’s gathering motto for this day’s texts. The gospel, which just sounded toward us from the altar, therefore deals, as it ought, with “the chief commandment in the law,” the commandment of love, the guide at the crossroads from which “the way of perfection” goes out. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Everyone surely sees that he who, without blinking and without lying, could step forward and say that he keeps these two commandments, would be “a perfect man.”

To love someone or something means to rejoice over someone or something. So simple it really is. If the joy dwells in the heart, everything else follows of itself, and no groping after the way is called for. He who keeps these two commandments — the commandments of love to God and love to the neighbor — rejoices over God, whatever happens, whatever loathsome things are thrown upon him, whatever cross is laid on his shoulders. It is not only this, that he holds fast to God, but he is glad and thankful over everything that God does. And he rejoices over people, whatever they hit upon, however they behave. It is not only this, that he holds out in outward kindness toward his surroundings, but he is in his heart glad and thankful over his neighbor, for he loves him. Such is love.

This love can sometimes be realized on earth, namely toward a definite person. A mother can, for example, love her lost son or her lost daughter with such an unselfish love. But if we love a person so, then we must cut down the sacrifice for all the others — otherwise we cannot manage to live at all. And we usually make this limiting of our love by a quite clear ground-rule. We choose out what is ours, and then we sacrifice our own for those who belong to us: members of our own family, wife, husband, children, and parents, sometimes also our own people. With the others it may go as it can. We must do so. This demand lies in life itself. No family and no people would stand if people were not driven to look after the right of their own against others, and under personal renunciations went to guard the fellowship into which they have been set: the home and the people. So the strife on earth arises. Every home seeks to give its children the best places, in love to the children — which means that children from other homes do not get them. Every people seeks in the struggle to look after its resources, in love to the children of its own people — which means that other peoples do not get them. When our fathers spoke of our living in the world of the fall, they meant nothing other than that we live in this state of struggle, and that of necessity, without possibilities of getting out of it. Some believe that we can get out of it. They want to give up all struggle, for people and family. But

they will surely see that they thereby only bring about misfortune for those who stand near them, their own children and their own fellow countrymen. For selfishness is a reality, and it never pays to try to explain away a reality.

How does it go with “the way of perfection” in such a world? It seems to become ever more indistinct and narrow, and at last it ends blindly, in the middle of the forest, the dark forest of sin and evil on earth. We must begin at another end. Perfection belongs at home with God in his heaven. There the song of praise sounds from those who have wandered here but have been loosed from the compulsion of earth. There “the way of perfection” is light and broad and clear. And this way goes downward, down toward the dark earth, like a shining bridge. On that way walks a man who goes down toward the earth in order to exercise God’s perfection in the world of the fall. He became a child of earth, who was wrapped and laid in a manger, “for there was no place for Joseph and Mary in the inn.” People had taken possession of all the free rooms for travelers. So one does on earth. This was the entrance of the Perfect One into the life of earth, and the continuation was like the beginning, with the cross as the last. But from Bethlehem to Golgotha he lived in love to God “with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind,” and in love to the neighbor as himself. It was this — the holy mercy — that was the meaning of his life. And because he lived God’s life, he could not die, but rose on the third day. With that, “the way of perfection,” which goes out from heaven, has got an entrance into the life of earth, a firm bridgehead here, for Christ lives and is near us still today.

With that we have come over to the second half of our text: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” This part of the text is dark and needs an exposition verse by verse. The background of this conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees is the Jewish hope of a restoration of David’s kingdom. David’s time as king was the Jews’ time of great power. In many circles there lived, in Jesus’ time, the hope that the Messiah would break the rule of the Romans and restore Israel in national and political independence and power. So David was understood in a way as set over the coming Messiah. The Messiah was only to lead the development back to the state under David. This outward conception of God’s will and counsel the Lord Christ wants to reject and kill. Therefore he points to the 110th psalm in the Psalter, over which it stands that what follows is a psalm precisely by David. The first verse in this psalm begins thus: “The Lord said to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand.’” All knew that this meant: 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 — mine — Lord. How can you then claim, Jesus wants to say, how can you claim that the Messiah is only to be son to David — that is, 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, at the same time as he is the Son of Man. He leads God’s life on earth, to all people, and he cannot serve only a single people’s political and national dreams of happiness. So the Lord breaks out of egoism’s narrow gathering around one’s own people and its welfare. “Jerusalem is desolate, its temple has fallen... but the kingdom of Christ lasts,” today, now, across all wars and all borders of peoples. And when the Lord Christ brings something other than restoration to the Jewish kingdom, this also means that he gives something other than the law of Moses, something other than the naked commandments. His message is the gospel of the unmerited grace and mercy of the perfect God. This truth he had come to lead into a dark and tormented world.

And now we can let the two halves of the text meet and light one another. The first part of our text deals with the “chief commandment in the law.” The second part of our text deals with Christ, the Lord of the gospel. The first part is God’s demand on us, the guide that points to “the way of perfection.” The second part speaks of God’s perfect gift in the forgiveness of sins. Half our text is law. Half our text is gospel.

These two, God’s holy law and God’s incomprehensible gospel, apply precisely to the struggling and groping human world whose face we just sketched, the world of evil, precisely that and no other. If the earth were heaven, we should need neither law nor gospel. But now all our ways here do in fact go through thicket and dark, and therefore we need both, both guiding commands and shining stars over the ranks, both demands and gifts from the God of heaven. We also receive both. But it matters to keep them apart and not mix them together.

The law you have, among other places, in your conscience. It disturbs you unceasingly. It does not let go of you. It points stubbornly to what is twisted in your life, and it gnaws and aches in you if you go the wrong way. You know yourself how it is, and need no closer description of the matter. But you also know that commands alone do not help you far. Through them you can be forced to leave off the outward sin itself, but your heart is not healed. Through strictness toward yourself you can do what you consider to be right, but under inward resistance and without real joy.

The heart is healed through goodness, and only through goodness. You see that you have received a gift in your poor life. A grace has been given you, which shines through your everyday and makes the way light to walk. It can be many things that bear a message to us of

God's love: a friend, a child, a subject of joy in the work. If you still have something of the child's mind left, you can really think you see how God smiled when he gave you that little gift. And now, when you are glad, you are — without knowing it yourself — a purer expression of love than when your cramped will drove you to the good. All such outward good that you receive comes out of God's love, in which this whole mysterious human life rests. But the greatest of all gifts is the forgiveness of sins. If you do not believe that it is so, that only proves that you do not know what the forgiveness of sins is. You think that you must always go on grieving over that sin from long ago, digging in it, in thought returning there and never getting free of it. You may know that it is that burden which makes your life as poor as it is. And you may know that you may let go of the whole of it. So good is God, though you do not believe it. You may begin anew every morning, when the sun goes up and your day comes to you with new tasks and new gifts. The old is old, and you go on along your path, "with new-footed hope," day by day. This message, that sin is swept away like a cloud, that is the sum of the gospel, God's perfect gift. Admit that you do not quite believe that. You do not quite live in it.

Now you shall get to know why you do not believe it, why you do not live in it. It is because you do not take the law fully in earnest. There are no possibilities of believing the gospel if one does not believe the law. If one wants to have to do with God, one must take God as he is, the whole God, in his unfathomable majesty. It will not do to create for oneself a little God of one's own after one's own little clever brain. That is, it will do, but then one must also have one's invented, powerless god, and not the real, mighty God, who forgives sins. This true God is both the God of the law and the God of the gospel, and you must bow before him as he is.

See, there is a condition for the forgiveness of sins. And it is this simple thing, that we, as God's hard disciples, call sin sin. This is now laid aside. Sin is traced back to two roots: first, heredity; second, environment. "I have such parents that I have become what I am." That is the one. "I have received impressions from such surroundings that I have become what I am." That is the other. Neither can one "help." That is, everything essential, the very constitution of the heart, that one cannot "help." It is not called sin. So a few outward trifles are left over, and when one comes in on such small matters, then one perhaps speaks of sin.

To this is to be said: God knows that we live in a fallen world, where evil goes by inheritance and where no one can become unstained. He says nevertheless: "Your heart shall be pure and holy." He judges the sin that is in me, even that which I have inherited and that which was

grafted into me by my surroundings, as also that which I have committed with deliberate courage. We human beings are not God. We are not to save the world. We are therefore not to judge the world either. We are to take account of heredity and environment and help people to rights with their bad dispositions and bad influences. Among us human beings the small measures hold. We can speak of good folk and bad folk. But God is and remains God. Before him we are all stained with uncleanness, and no one is righteous more than he who hangs on the cross. God wants to lead us to his eternal, heavenly kingdom, and therefore he has sunk his two strong arms down into the dark of earth. His left hand is the law, the demand, the command, and with that hand he takes hold of us: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind — and your neighbor as yourself." And God's right hand is Christ, the sign of God's incomprehensible mercy, he through whom God today says to you: "With an everlasting love I have loved you. Rise up and believe. I know your sin, better than you yourself do. But now I level it out before your eyes. I want to use you for other and important things. Let the dead bury their dead. I will be your Father, and you shall be my child."

The strictness in God's demand draws us into the fresh air, where people's talk is gone and where we breathe God's reality. Then all excusing of sin falls, and only the forgiveness is left. For God forgives everything, but he excuses nothing, not even what kind people think we cannot "help."

The forgiveness of sins is daily. If one evening you think that you need no forgiveness, you have not lived better than usual that day, but worse, for then you cannot have lived before God's face. And so to stand before God's law and receive God's gospel, that is to walk on "the way of perfection," such as that way now is on earth, in the conditions of the fall. If you live so before God, it shall be marked in your life, even if it is granted to none of us to transform earth into heaven. If you live so before God, then joy also, this seldom-seen and highborn guest, shall dwell with you, disturbed by sorrow but not conquered by it.

Today's gospel, with its two halves of the text — the piece about the law and the piece about Christ — thus points back in time, to Sinai, the mountain of the holy Commander, and to Golgotha, the hill of the great Giver. But at the same time it sets before our gaze the two living realities between which our daily Christian life swings: the continual demand and the eternally fresh gift. Through both God deals with us, and through both he lifts us, in continual struggle with us, out of our own, with its I-selfishness, family-selfishness, and

people-selfishness. Through both we are prepared for a world which the mind cannot grasp but which the heart surmises: the world of perfection beyond time. There “the way of perfection” leads. And the farther we walk it, the more Christ’s word about himself shall grow clear for us: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Amen.

Translator’s notes. He gave this sermon no title. The limiting of love to one’s own family and one’s own people is left as he states it in 1940, including the judgment that to give up that struggle brings misfortune on one’s own. The refusal to reduce sin to heredity and environment is kept. The hearer stays you. Christ stays he. The hymn lines are for sense, not meter. One word in the psalm exposition is unclear in the typescript and is left as “mine.”

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·