

SERMON

The Good Work: Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

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Luke 10:23–37

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, 8 September 1963

In the Monastery Church, Lund

Text: Mark 12:41-44.

Hymns: (402:1-2,?) 237:1-5, 206:4, 357:1-3, 411:1-3

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

God, send your Spirit into our hearts, so that we hear your word and obey you in our deeds!

Amen.

The text is read.

O God, silence for a moment all other words except this one, so that we hear what you say to us! Amen.

Usually God speaks in his word of what he does and we receive. But in this text the word points to a human being and her deed on earth. We let the text speak for itself and tell us what the good deed is. First we shall see what the good deed is, over there in Jerusalem, and then we move over here to ourselves and the question of what our deed might be, if it were good.

A. Now next we go over there, to the poor widow, to the good deed outside ourselves, “in Jerusalem.”

1/ The first and most important thing is this, that the good deed “goes out” from me and benefits another. “Many rich people put in large sums,” it says. How could she, with her penny, put in “more” than they? Because she gave “out of her poverty,” she tore herself loose from herself—and gave. The others’ existence was undisturbed, even after the giving, but in her life a penny meant that she herself was given, “all she had to live on.” Our text is placed in the

church year on the Sunday of the Good Samaritan, the thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, where the heading is “Our neighbor,” that is, someone other than ourselves. As a rule we build up a picture of “the good deed” in such a way that it comes back to us. But our neighbor, and through our neighbor Christ speaks, our neighbor rightly says: “good is the deed when it benefits me,” “good is your deed when it costs you something, when it takes something out of yourself.” Jesus’ gaze here in the text, the gaze that cuts through the surface and lays bare what it costs, is the divine eye, this eye that one day, in the last judgment, shall reveal what it has seen, to everyone’s surprise.

2 For—secondly—the good deed takes place in the midst of the crowd without people noticing that it takes place. It was not far from the world of the rich that the widow gave her two mites. She went up to the treasury, among the others, among the rich, and handed over a smaller amount than they. The deed was visible to all—and despised.

You may be looking for a holy sacrificial person who gives herself away, and she may be sitting next to you in the pew and does not look holy in any way. But her life is laid out so that everything is given to others; to screaming children and to the kitchen and to part-time work outside the home—perhaps she has not been able to come here at all today, she has to give away “all she had to live on.” Where is she to get the strength from? That is what the saints look like. They live in the midst of us and we do not see them. But the divine eye sees, down into the depths. Therefore God’s judgment is a surprise; it does not come like a school premium—which one can calculate in advance. Instead God’s judgment lifts up a B or a B+ that has cost something, won by a child whose parents quarrel at home while the TV blares and goes on. We can never hand out premiums correctly, for we see nothing. But God sees his saints in the midst of the general crowd.

3/ Because God sees and knows, fruit also grows—thirdly—from the good deed, long after it has been done. In the treasury the two mites did not amount to much. The most important fruit of the deed did not lie in the chest, but it lies here, in the text; we receive the fruit now. For nearly two thousand years her penny has been sown and it has awakened new deeds over the whole earth. In a cramped setting many human lives have been lived with long-lasting, blessed fruit, simply because they were lived in faithfulness, and so gave a picture of real life to future generations, a picture that could not be forgotten. The question of what “it is good for” is, often enough, the Tempter’s question, the satanic question, by which we would be tempted to abandon our deed and seek another that looks finer. Jesus’ deed, completed on the cross in

the midst of the general crowd, began with the temptation in the wilderness, where he was tempted away from self-giving, but stood firm: no deed is richer in fruit than his. We all live, even today, by the drink he offers us in the means of grace just as we taste the light of the sun and the rain of heaven. But when he now reaches us, with his Word, then we all stand in the midst of the whirl of our deeds (“bubbling stream” crossed out and replaced with “whirl”), in temptation—where we must choose deeds, uncertain of what “the good” is.

B. With that we move ourselves from Jerusalem, here, to our own world.

Then it appears that we stand in very different temptations; one has it one way and the other quite another.

1/ Someone here perhaps already knows what his or hers is (“or hers” probably added in Örebro 1966)—without doing it. While we were speaking of the widow and her mites, our own neglect rose up in the conscience and troubled us. “There you hear, for the hundredth time! Do not flee any longer, away from the deed that you know is yours!” It is certain that much immaturity and restlessness in our inner life comes from this flight from the waiting, the right deed, which we should perform—and do not perform. If someone knows: this is my situation, then it does not help much with all sorts of spiritual inventions—it becomes just as immature and restless, that! Nothing else helps here but to begin walking on the hard, everyday stretch of road, there before you! Fear not, but go! Rise up and go forward and lay the mites in the chest!

2/ But another sits here and does not know what his or her deed is. There are usually many such uncertain ones in this city where among other things there is a university, with a new academic year just beginning, with new wavering, new despair and new seeking after the Deed. Here the church congregation has something to pray for. And the wavering one himself, young or old, has no other way out than to seek, pray and wait, in faithfulness do the work that lies nearest and then: endure in waiting. One day the deed will surely lie there firm and immovable, perhaps enclosing all the hours of the day, even those of sleep, so that in one’s stress one will remember these years long ago, when one could still rest and breathe and in uncertainty do nothing.

3/ Such people are surely also sitting here, those who know their deed and are under it and for whom the question, at every age, can become: “How shall I manage to carry this through?”

Like emptied of everything, the two mites are the strength “they have in their possession,” and there before them stand the treasuries and demand that these mites, too, shall be put in.

If this is your situation, then remember that you belong to the elect! All God’s promises apply to you. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” And at last there shall come a day, a bright day, when it shall be sung over the bier “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them,’” yes, they follow them until the hour when Mercy judges all our deeds. Then the song of praise shall rise, up to God alone, “God and the Lamb,” the sacrificed spotless Lamb, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray.

O Lord God, heavenly Father, you who let your grace flow, like the light of the sun and the rain of heaven, over evil and good, and who have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to reveal in word and deed the riches of your love. We pray you: grant that we, on our way through life, do not inquire who is our neighbor but instead seize the opportunities you prepare for the one who needs our help. Help us not to pass by where we ought to stop and serve those whom your Son calls his brothers, and in whom he calls us to serve him himself. Amen.