

The Fourth Sunday after Michaelmas (Trinity 22)
St. Matthew 18:23-35: "I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins."
October 21/22, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O almighty, eternal God: We confess that we are poor sinners and cannot answer one time out of a thousand, when You contend with us; but with all our hearts we thank You, that You have taken all our guilt from us and laid it upon Your dear Son Jesus Christ, and made Him to atone for it. We pray, graciously sustain us in faith, and so govern us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may live according to Your will, in neighborly love, service and helpfulness, and not give way to wrath or revenge, that we may not incur Your wrath, but always find in You a gracious Father; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 164)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. / "So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. / But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' / "So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' / "He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. / "Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. / "So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who made himself poor, so that you might become rich (2Cor. 8:9), dear fellow redeemed:

We say it just about every weekend. It is a concise summary of what the Bible teaches about God. It is called the "Apostles' Creed," because it is perfectly consistent with the inspired words of the apostles in the New Testament. But as basic and foundational as this confession is, it is completely rejected by the unbelieving world. What we confess as true and accurate, the world says is false and made up. "God the Father is the 'Maker of heaven and earth'? No way. Jesus

was 'born of the Virgin Mary'? Impossible. He 'rose again from the dead'? No chance. Everyone who believes in Jesus will rise again and live forever? Give me a break."

Maybe the only statement an unbeliever could accept is that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried," though there are many who deny that a famous Jesus in the first century even existed. The world's denial of the Apostles' Creed also includes the rejection of this part of the third article: "**I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins.**"

I

What is so objectionable about the forgiveness of sins? Shouldn't everyone believe that sin can be forgiven? You would think so. But instead of welcoming forgiveness, our society just does away with sin. It is not as though sin has actually diminished or gone away. It's that sinners choose not to see sin as sin anymore. If someone is accused of wrongdoing, he or she is quick to pass the blame. They might say that their bad behavior is justified by the bad behavior of others. Or they point out how others are far worse than they are. Or they might blame their upbringing as the problem or current circumstances beyond their control.

The other approach is to argue that what used to be considered sinful is not sinful anymore. We see this in the way the authorities are openly disrespected and abused, and in the cavalier way people treat sexual activity and marriage. "I won't let anybody else tell me how to live," they say. "I have the right to do whatever I want with my own body." In their minds, the only sin being committed is by the people who criticize the choices they make, and who presume to tell them they are doing what is wrong.

But sin is not determined by personal opinion, or by what one feels is good or bad behavior. The line between good and bad, right and wrong, is determined by God. And He does not leave us guessing where that line is. He gives us a clear standard of holiness in ten simple statements. These commands of God spell out our responsibility toward Him and toward our neighbor. They are very clear and can hardly be misunderstood. God says that we should fear, love, and trust in Him alone. He says we should honor His name and hear His Word. He says that we should respect the authorities, defend life, flee from sexual immorality (1Cor. 6:18), and help our neighbor keep His belongings and a good reputation.

This is what God says we should do. "*So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin*" (Jam. 4:17). That is what sin is, doing the opposite of what God says. God is a God of order, which is evident not only by His law, but also in His creation. Sin goes against God's order. "*Sin is lawlessness*" (1Jn. 3:4). That is the definition of sin.

So how big a problem is sin? It is a problem that we often see more clearly in others than in ourselves. "He should not have said what he did," we think, or "She should not be living like that." But we give ourselves a pass. We point out the bad in others while only looking at the good in ourselves. But supposing there were no one else around for comparison. If it were just you standing before the holy God, how would your life look?

It would look a lot like a servant standing before his master, to whom he owed ten thousand talents. Do you know the value of ten thousand talents? It is estimated that just one talent equals twenty years' worth of wages. So if one year's worth of wages were \$30,000, then ten

thousand talents would be six billion dollars! The king ordered that the servant be sold along with *"his wife and children and all that he had,"* and the proceeds to go toward what he owed. But even all of that would hardly make a dent in the tremendous debt.

This is how it is for us. Even if we sold everything we had, even if we gathered together all of our resources, our good deeds, our good behavior, and applied them toward our debt of sin, we would hardly make a dent. Our sinfulness is so great, our trespasses so immeasurable. Whether acknowledged or not, the sins of every single person are so extensive, that the biggest book in the world could not contain them all.

Perhaps this sounds like an exaggeration to you. But if your sin and the sins of the world were not so immense, why did God become Man? Why did He give Himself into the hands of His enemies? Why did He let Himself be tortured and killed? Did He make a mistake? Was your heart more pure and the world more holy than He thought? The cheerful optimist wearing rose-colored glasses might say that there is more good than evil in the world. But *"the LORD sees not as man sees"* (1Sam. 16:7). He sees the human heart for what it is and correctly perceives the fatal flaws of the human condition.

II

So before you hear about forgiveness, you must first learn to see your sinful nature and sinful heart as God does. You must acknowledge that sin exists, and that you are responsible for committing a great deal of it. Once the law has done its work and shown where you have fallen short and sinned against God, then the Lord has you right where He wants you. He does not punish you or torment you. He has pity on you, just like the master had pity on his servant. He releases you from the debt you owe Him; He forgives your sins. How is this possible? Why does God let you off so easily?

It is not as though God just overlooks your debt of sin. This would be the same as God admitting that His commands are not actually binding. God cannot overlook sin. He is a just God. His law is right and true, and therefore His judgment is also. Some think they are capable of satisfying God's righteous requirement on their own. They sound just as foolish as the servant begging for his master's patience until he pays everything back. The debt is simply too great. Repayment is beyond reach.

For a debt as immense as ours, only the one to whom it was owed could satisfy it. This is why God sent His Son to be born of Mary. He gave Jesus the task of repaying the debt. As the time of reckoning approached, Jesus begged His Father that there might be some other way. The LORD had once provided a ram, so that Abraham would not have to sacrifice his only son (Gen. 22:13). Could it be so now too? But Jesus was the ram caught in the thicket of God's law. For the law to be fulfilled, a perfect sacrifice was required. Jesus had to be slaughtered.

What precious blood it was that flowed from the wounds of Jesus! It was the blood not only of a Man; it was the blood of God. That is how the LORD can be just and still forgive you. That is how the LORD can declare you righteous even though you are a sinner. The Apostle John states, *"the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1Jn. 1:7-9).

God's love for you is even greater than the great debt of your sin. The LORD declares to you that your iniquity is pardoned, and that His grace pays back twice as much as you sinfully spent (Is. 40:2). He says that your ten thousand talent debt is satisfied. Do you find this hard to believe? You should. It is hard to believe. It is not reasonable at all. But it is not our reason that counts. *"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool"* (1:18). The LORD forgives every single one of your sins.

And then there is also the matter of your neighbor. Others have sinned against you in the past, just like you have sinned against others. If your sins against God are ten thousand talents, God sees the sins against you as a hundred denarii. One denarius was about a day's wage, so a hundred denarii would be about a third of an annual salary. So while you were indebted to God for six billion dollars so to speak, your neighbor might be indebted to you for ten thousand dollars. The debt owed by your neighbor is real, but we often make those debts into more than they are. We get easily offended when things don't go our way. We brood over the unkind words and actions of others, so that the original offense is magnified in our minds. We might even declare that the offense is unforgivable.

But that is not how the LORD treats you. He has mercy on you and forgives your debt even though you do not deserve it. This is why Jesus tells you to *"forgive your brother from your heart,"* and why He taught you to pray, *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* You forgive by grace just as God does. This is a hard task, and we often fail at it. But God calls us again and again to hear His Word of forgiveness and to sit at His table of forgiveness. For it is in these places that He fills us with love for our neighbor and strengthens us to believe that our sins truly are forgiven.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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