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The Works of Martin Chemnitz Georg Williams 103

A Plea for Commonsense in Exegesis H. P. Hamann 115

Walther's Ecclesiology John M. Drickamer
and C. George Fry 130

General Justification George Stoeckhardt 139

Formula of Concord Article VI.
The Third Use of the Law David P. Scaer 145

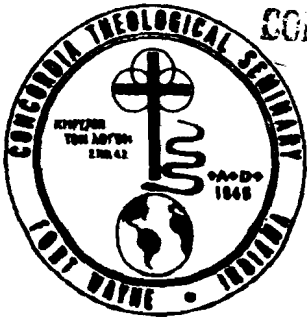
Teaching the Christian Faith By Developing
A Repertoire of Skills. Anne Jenkins Driessnack 156

Theological Observer. 163

Homiletical Studies 172

Book Reviews. 195

Books Received 216



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Homiletical Studies

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 18:15-20
(SEPT. 3, 1978)

This pericope is located in a larger section dealing with salvation, e.g., the salvation of children, 18:1-14, and the necessity of frequent forgiveness, 18:23-35. The steps in approaching the erring brother are to gain him by making him aware of the gravity of his sin and not to bring about final exclusion from the Christian community. These steps reflect God's patience with the estranged world. The stress on restoration and not excommunication is reenforced by Jesus' response to Peter that forgiveness is always available for the penitent sinner regardless of the frequency of the offence (18:21f.). This is a demonstration of the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The presupposition of all forgiveness is the atonement of Jesus who searches for mankind (18:12-14). The textual evidence is divided on whether this is a private sin ("against you", v. 15) or any sin. The context seems to point to a sin committed within the religious community, e.g., excluding others from the kingdom (18:10). The church with whom the final excommunication rests includes local Christian communities, but certainly also involves the wider confessional fellowship as might be represented at the Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:22). Our pericope could reflect the highly developed organization of the larger territorial church which convened in Jerusalem in the fifth decade. The authenticity of these words as Jesus's own cannot be questioned, since a church trying to gain non-Jews would hardly call an excommunicated person "a Gentile" (v. 17).

Handling Sin and Gaining the Brother

- I. Common Annoyances
 - A. Personal aggravations should not be interpreted as sins, and personal judgments of condemnation should be avoided.
 1. Mere personal aggravations should be overlooked. It is un-Christian behavior to pass judgment quickly.
 2. Christians must put the best construction on the acts of others (the Eighth Commandment).
 - B. Christians should bear offences as Christ did.
 1. Christians should not seek retribution for each real or imaginary offense, 1 Pt. 1:20, Mt. 6:12.
 2. Christ in His passion quietly bore offences and did not seek retribution, 1 Pt 1:21f., Mt 27:11.
- II. Offensive Impenitence
 - A. Persistent and public sins
 1. The persistent sinner is destroying himself and others, Mt 18:5, 7, 15.
 2. The uncensored persistent sinner is giving the message to others that such behavior is acceptable, 1 Cr 5:6.
 - B. Doctrinal deviations
 1. The proclamation of false doctrine is a sin against God, Jas 3:1, Mt 18:5f.
 2. Persistent false teaching destroys the church's unity, Mt 8:15-27.
 - C. Excommunication
 1. Excommunication is not a punishment but an act of love to bring the sinner to an awareness of his offence and the need for repentance, v. 17.
 2. His exclusion from the Christian community stresses the seriousness of impenitence, v. 17.

III. The Attitude Toward the Erring Brother

A. Patience and concern.

1. The three steps in giving the erring brother an opportunity to repent reflects God's patience with all sinners, vv. 15-17, 1 Pt 3:20.
2. Private confrontation makes it easier for the offender to repent without public attention, v. 15.
3. Bringing others determines that a real sin has indeed been committed, v. 16.

B. Jesus's attitude

1. Jesus saw His ministry as seeking the lost, Mt 18:14.
2. Our ultimate goal is also to seek the lost regardless of the sin or its frequency, Mt 18:21f.

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THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 18:21-35 (SEPTEMBER 10, 1978)

Peter's question (v. 21) reflects a view of forgiveness which bases itself on the ability of the forgiver to endure. Jesus' answer and parable are consistent with other expressions on human forgiveness, always connecting it to divine forgiveness (Matt 6:14, Mark 11:25). The debt suggested by Jesus (v. 24) would be about \$10,000,000, an impossible amount for a servant to owe or repay. Note that the reversal of the Master's decision (v. 27) not only responded to the servant's request for time (it was an unbelievable suggestion that he could ever repay the master), but also met the actual situation of the servant, in that he forgave the debt. The fellow servant owed approximately \$20. The jailer, to whom the ungrateful servant was delivered, is more properly a "torturer," and the length of sentence, though terminal in theory ("until he should pay all his debt") was, in practical terms, endless.

The central thought of the text is that Christians, being forgiven by God, ought to be forgiving to those who offend them. The problem is that one often fails to see a relationship between the forgiveness we receive from God and the God-given obligation to forgive others. The goal of the sermon is that the hearer be led to see the importance of, and power for, forgiving others.

Introduction: One of the constant charges raised against Christian preaching is that it is not practical. Whether that charge is true or not may be debated, but of this there can be no debate: today's text is practical, and it speaks to every hearer, for the topic concerns the way in which we forgive those people who offend us. Now this world is so arranged that each one of us has at least some one person to forgive. Perhaps it is your parent or your child, your brother or sister, neighbor or colleague, stranger or friend. In our text, God calls you to think about the person who has offended you, as you learn

A Lesson On Being A Forgiver!

I. How Are We to Approach the Task of Forgiving?

A. Some approach it with a calculator.

1. "How often?" - the question of the disciples (v. 21).
2. "How often?" - a popular question today.
 - a. We ask it when we judge the "sincerity" of the offender.
 - b. We ask it when we place conditions on the offender.

B. Some approach it with a balance.

1. This is the picture in the text, where forgiveness was withheld by the demands of equality (v. 28).
2. Often our sense of necessity to forgive is only touched off by our debts to the offender.

C. Jesus teaches us to approach this task with grace.

1. Grace that is needed for an endless task (v. 22).
2. Grace that is found in an infinite God. Thus we are directed to:

II. See How God Forgives!

A. God forgives by grace that is undeserved.

1. Consider the plight of the servant—nothing to offer for his cause (v. 25, 26).
2. Consider our plight before God.
3. Yet God doesn't barter; He forgives (v. 26-27).

B. God forgives by grace that flows from His "heart."

1. The servant is forgiven out of "pity" (v. 27).
2. We are forgiven out of "the tender mercy of our God" (Luke 1:78).
3. ALL true forgiveness needs such a source, so:

C. God forgives by grace that empowers the forgiven sinner.

1. Jesus' warning (v. 35) points to the source of our forgiving - the heart.
2. Jesus' cross points to the power for our forgiving hearts - the grace in which we stand.
3. The forgiveness we possess, being as vast as our sinfulness, is the only resource with which to be forgiving to others.

Today we have been given something practical, something to practice each day of our lives. It is the blessed power to forgive which alone can dispel our bitterness and restore our joy. It is a power that is not ours, but is given to us through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whose sacrifice God richly and daily forgives all our sins. By His grace, let us begin today the practice of being a forgiver.

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THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 20:1-16
(SEPTEMBER 17, 1978)

The denarius (20¢) was an average day's wage in Jesus' day. The second group hired (v. 4) do not enter into the apparent bargaining of the first group (v. 2). Already a different spirit is evident. Those hired at the eleventh hour (v. 7) carry in their explanation an implicit acknowledgement of the desire for work. While those hired first were wrong in their assumption about increased wages (v. 10), they were correct in their assessment of the situation at hand (v. 12), i.e., that the householder had made all his workers equal. By this, his generosity becomes evident (v. 15). This parable is fraught with perils for the interpreter. The temptation is nearly irresistible to connect the denarius with "eternal life." But to do so is to make the gift of God (Romans 4:4) a matter of wages earned (at least for some). It seems clear that the direction of the parable offers application to Christians in their service in the Lord's kingdom; so the central thought to be the need for a proper motivation for Christians in their kingdom-work. The goal of the sermon is to focus on the inherent value of service to the Lord.

Introduction: In the past few years, those who have studied the way in which congregations grow have discovered that those churches which exhibit the greatest vitality are the churches which emphasize the fact that every Christian has a calling. These churches accept as a high-priority the function of training and equipping Christians for their calling as parents, children, students, employees, teachers, leaders, servers, and the like. Where the challenge is most clearly given to the individual member to find, prepare for, and exercise their callings, there the individual is most in need of clear

guidance as to the nature of such service in God's kingdom. To these Christians our Lord speaks in his text, answering the oft-neglected question:

Is It Worth It?

I. Working in the Kingdom Is Worth It Because of the Surroundings

- A. The householder invites workers to his fields.
 - 1. His riches and His resources are open to those called to work.
 - 2. His invitation changes idle hours into fulfilling ones.
- B. Christ shows here that God calls to the surroundings of His grace.
 - 1. The calling of Baptism - God's invitation opens His riches to us.
 - 2. The calling of Evangelism - where the Gospel speaks to idle hearts: "come into the Kingdom."
 - 3. All of us have been placed in the Kingdom, where the grace of God which makes working worthwhile.

II. Working in the Kingdom Is Worth It Because of the Service!

- A. The householder makes the daily life worthwhile.
 - 1. Surely, daily wages are the interest of some (v. 20).
 - 2. But beyond this, there is the need to work as a part of our nature. Notice the lament of the eleventh hour recruits (v. 7). (Surely, idleness was a reproach beyond the fact of lost income).
- B. Christ shows us that work in the kingdom makes life worthwhile.
 - 1. Context—see Matt. 19:28-30.
 - 2. The opportunity to serve Him (note the invitations in vs. 4, 7).
 - 3. The assurance of His care and concern for those who serve (vs. 4, 15).

III. Working in the Kingdom Is Worth It Because of the Surprise!

- A. The householder shows that reward is not the purpose of toil.
 - 1. Reward is not denied—vs. 2, 13.
 - 2. But it is not the purpose of the toil.
 - a. This purpose was the advancement of the Kingdom - even a little.
 - b. The reward is from the storehouse of the owner.
- B. Christ shows us that our purpose in His Kingdom is not for wages.
 - 1. Wages earned are ours (see Romans 4:4, 5; v. 14a).
 - 2. The rich rewards are His, for us a surprise.

Christ teaches us three good reasons to understand that the call to service in His Kingdom is truly "worth it"—because of His calling, because of the work to be done, and because of the immeasurable and "surprising" grace which stands behind our service. There is no better time than now to begin to find, prepare for, and exercise our spiritual opportunities as priests of God (I Peter 2:9, 10).

RWS

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 21:28-32 (SEPTEMBER 24, 1978)

In this parable, Jesus offers his antagonists (the Sanhedrists) the opportunity to condemn themselves, which they unwittingly exercise. Note that there are "children," not simply (and more formally) "sons." Thus, a love-relationship is suggested. The first son responds with a disrespectful rejection of his father's plea (v. 29). However, note that there is no effort to cover this

decision of his will with hypocritical words. The "repenting" of the first son is not set in the stronger possible word of *metanoein*. The second son respectfully and emphatically responds to the father's request (v. 30). Jesus lets the religious leaders speak the correct judgment with regard to which child *did* the will of their father (v. 31). Thus, Jesus points to the hypocrisy of verbal assent without and apart from obedience. The "tax collectors and prostitutes" certainly were not known for verbal praise of God's will. Nevertheless, repentance and faith (v. 32) sent them into the fields of God's kingdom where the Law-quoting religious leaders failed to enter.

The central thought of this passage is that faith and works belong together (John 6:40; 15:8; James 2:17). The problem with the Christian is a temptation to be dishonest in his commitment to faith-wrought obedience to God. Thus, the goal of the sermon is to encourage and empower Christians to a life of repentance, faith, and heart-felt commitment for a positive response to the will of God.

Introduction: Now that the school-year is well underway, families with students have set themselves into patterns that will prevail until next summer. The influence of the "school-year" is so predominant that many people who no longer have an active association with a school still are affected by the September-to-June pace of living. The church calendar, too, is largely affected by the school-year, and so, like other "new year" times, we find people approaching life with new resolutions and new commitments.

Students are resolving to produce new study habits, while parents are resolving to avoid the entanglements of transporting their children to endless activities. Preachers are resolving to prepare more interesting sermons, while congregations are resolving to conduct ever more ambitious programs. Meanwhile, all of us find ourselves resolving to reach new levels of spiritual maturity, whether it be in the area of personal Bible study, family stewardship, or congregational evangelism. Our text gives us important insight as we begin this new school-year, for in our spiritual resolutions, Jesus encourages us:

Let's Be Honest To God!

I. Honest to Agree.

A. Clearly we ought to agree with God.

1. This is implicit in the parable, in the reaction of both sons.
2. We see this from the context (where Jesus' authority is questioned).
3. It is the nature of God's authority to command agreement.
4. The disagreement of the first son brought repentance.

B. Clearly, also, we ought to be honest with God.

1. Even the Pharisees recognized the evil of dishonesty (v. 31).
2. We ought to repent of surface agreement with God where the will is dissenting. (Examples might include congregational vocal support for evangelism, stewardship, Sunday School).
3. Let's have honest confrontation of our will with the will of God. If we *don't* agree, it is because we *won't* obey.

II. Honest to Obey.

A. With Jesus' hearers, lack of obedience was symptomatic of lack of faith.

1. There was no *repentance* among the Pharisees.
2. There was no *faith* among them.
3. Therefore, there was no response among them (just as with the second son).

- B. God gives faith through His Means of Grace.
 - 1. The father's loving approach to His sons.
 - 2. Depicts God's gracious approach to us.
 - a. In Christ's finished work.
 - b. In the Spirit's ongoing work.
- C. With us, too, faith is the key to honest obedience.
 - 1. Faith that repents of shallow, dishonest commitments.
 - 2. Faith that clings to the forgiveness Christ offers.
 - 3. Faith that is willing to respond to God's will.

This is a perfect time to reevaluate our spiritual maturity, to hear God's will point out the path in which we should walk (Ps. 119:105), and to resolve to agree and to go. Above all, it is a time for us to be honest with God, as a people who have been called into His kingdom by grace and equipped for service through faith.

RWS

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 21:33-43 (OCTOBER 1, 1978)

In this parable, Jesus draws the thoughts of his antagonists to the parable of Isaiah 5:1, although the culprits change from Israel as a nation to the religious leaders themselves. Implicit in Jesus' picture is the love and gracious care which is given to the vineyard by the owner (v. 33). The point at issue between the owner and the vinegrower is that obligation which the growers have by virtue of their leases (v. 34). The imagery here is of the leaders of the Jews and also their nation as the vinegrowers, of God as the owner, and the prophets as the slaves sent for the fruit, which depicts the obedience of faithful people. However, the issue is not on the fruit, but the actions of owner and growers, of God and His rebellious people. After rejecting the slaves, the owner sends his son (v. 37), whereupon Jesus speaks prophetically of His ensuing death outside Jerusalem (v. 39). The judgment which His hearers speak against the growers in the parable (v. 40) becomes the verdict which Jesus speaks against the Jewish leaders and nation (v. 43). Even the Old Testament foretells the same verdict, as Jesus quotes Ps. 118:22, 23.

The central thought of the text is that Jesus calls for a life of obedience in God's kingdom. The goal of the sermon is to lead Christians to identify their daily living with the life of obedience in the kingdom of grace.

Introduction: Living as we do in a so-called capitalistic society, we are intimately familiar with the concept of investing for a return. Perhaps many of us currently have investments in stocks and bonds. Most of us hold insurance policies, which likewise are investments where a return is expected. In our text Jesus reveals that, in a similar way, God has made investments from which He expects returns, and so we are led to consider the question:

Does God Profit From His Investment In Us?

- I. Jesus raises the question through His parable.
 - A. The vinegrowers are expected to profit the owner.
 - 1. For that reason the owner invests in their project (v. 33).
 - 2. For that reason the owner sends for his return from the investment (v. 34).
 - B. However, the vinegrowers refuse to produce a return for the owner.
 - 1. They reject his request (v. 35, 36).
 - 2. They rebel against the owner to seize the investment as their own (vs. 37-39).

- II. Jesus applies this question to the Jewish leaders and nation.
- A. God has "invested" in His chosen people.
 - 1. He has blessed them, so that they would be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3).
 - 2. He has entrusted to the religious leaders the role of nurturing and guiding the obedience of this people (Numbers 27:16, 17).
 - B. The Jewish nation repeatedly failed to bring God a return.
 - 1. They brought forth fruit not fitting for God (Isaiah 5:1ff).
 - 2. Their leaders failed to shepherd them in bringing forth a return (Ezekiel 34:1-16).
 - C. God is about to invest His Son as the Righteous One.
 - 1. With this investment a fruitful return should come forth (v. 37).
 - 2. Yet this investment, too, is rejected by the Jewish leaders (v. 39).
- III. Jesus applies this question now to us.
- A. God has blessed us with His investment.
 - 1. He has given us His Son as our Righteousness (v. 42).
 - 2. He has given us the blessings of His kingdom (v. 43).
 - a. By the protection and extension of His Church.
 - b. By the gathering and sustaining of this congregation.
 - c. Thereby nurturing us through the Means of Grace.
 - B. He has equipped us to be profitable in His kingdom.
 - 1. With a foundation (v. 42) on which to build.
 - 2. With a purpose to fulfill (Matthew 28:18-20).
 - 3. With an inheritance to receive - as a gift from Him, not as an object to be seized by rebellion (v. 38).

In our daily living we may see neither stocks nor bonds, and we may never walk through a vineyard. Nevertheless, Jesus has shown us that God has dearly invested in us, and has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified us that we might bring forth a return for Him. The truth is that we have been blessed, so that we might be a blessing to our world.

RWS

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 22:1-14
(OCTOBER 8, 1978)

Compare the text with Luke 14:16-24. Though higher-critics argue that Matthew and Luke embellish and alter one single event in the life of Christ to fit their separate purposes, there is no compelling reason to reject the obvious conclusion from these two texts in their respective contexts that Jesus used the same illustrative material more than once, addressing Himself on each occasion to the particular needs of his hearers. Thus, the final section (vs. 11-14) need not be viewed as Matthew's awkward addition, but more appropriately as an integral element of the parable. The parable points backward to Jewish history (vs. 4-6), forward to the fall of Jerusalem (v. 7), and immediately to the beginning of the "Gentile" era (vs. 9). Note that those who filled the banquet hall were, by reputation, both "bad and good" (v. 10). The final section (vs. 11-14) makes clear that one's presence at the feast is by the graciousness of the king, who provides the garment by which one may enter the hall. Thus, the man with no garment points to those who, by unbelief, reject God's provision of a robe of righteousness. Therefore, this man depicts those many who are called by the Gospel, but who are not among the "chosen" (v. 14) due to their rejection of God's gift of grace.

The central thought in this text is that salvation is God's gift to undeserving mankind. The problem addressed by the parable is the persistent

neglect which characterizes many people's response to the Gospel. The goal of the sermon, therefore, is to move the hearer to reexamine and cherish his salvation and his life with God.

Introduction: Negligence is one of those common failings which plagues us through much of our lives. Our own negligence causes many a pain, and the negligence of others creates frustration and inconvenience for everyone. However, negligence in physical, social, and material matters, no matter how painful, is not as threatening to us as spiritual negligence, which our Lord addresses with the parable of our text. Here Jesus calls out to us through the word of the text:

Don't Neglect Your Life with God!

I. Don't Neglect the Outreach of God's Invitation.

- A. The banquet invitation was the king's special call to fellowship.
 - 1. He extended himself in expense, effort, and invitation.
 - 2. His gracious invitation is even repeated despite its rejection.
 - 3. Yet, his intentions for fellowship are rebuffed.
- B. God has extended His invitation of grace to Israel, His chosen nation.
 - 1. Jesus depicts the rejection of God's grace.
 - 2. He shows the mistreatment of the prophets.
 - 3. He prophesies the fall of Jerusalem as God's response to rejection.
- C. Let us not neglect the implication for us: God's call is a serious matter.

II. Don't Neglect the Vastness of God's Grace

The banquet invitation is extended to any and all.

- 1. All kinds and sorts of men were invited.
- 2. The invitation was answered - the hall was filled.
- B. The Gospel invitation, likewise, is extended to any and all.
 - 1. Jesus shows that no one is beyond its call.
 - 2. He prophesies that this Gospel ministry will succeed in bringing in a full number (Romans 11:26).
- C. Purely by His tender mercy, God has invited us into the fellowship of His kingdom.

III. Don't Neglect the Nature of Our Presence in God's Kingdom.

- A. There was one who rejected the king's wedding garment.
 - 1. Wedding garments were supplied by the king for his guests.
 - 2. This man chose to refuse such a provision.
 - 3. He was cast out due to his willful rejection of the king's garment.
- B. God has provided a garment by which we enter His kingdom.
 - 1. It is the righteousness of Christ, His Son.
 - 2. This righteousness is intended to cover our sinful state.
 - 3. It is our righteousness by His grace through faith.
- C. Thus you need to perceive the nature of your standing in God's church.
 - 1. It is not secured by membership vow, financial contribution, or acts of service.
 - 2. Rather, it is given you by God's grace in your Baptism, to be worn through faith in His Son.

Let us not fall to the temptations which brought down the nation of Israel and the outcast of the parable. We have been given a great salvation which we ought not neglect.

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 22:15-21
(OCTOBER 15, 1978)

The Pharisees sought to "entangle" Jesus (v. 15). Compare this design with the contemporary legal notion "entrapment." Notice that among those waiting to hear Jesus' response are the "Herodians", a group of loyalists of King Herod's house who had cast their lot with the Romans. Thus, Jesus is faced with those who identify Roman taxation with blasphemy (Pharisees) and those who regard such taxation as necessary and proper (Herodians). In a "wicked" manner (v. 18), which Luke speaks of as "crafty" (Luke 20:23) and Mark as "hypocritical" (Mark 12:15), they put their question to the Lord. The tax was a "head-tax," levied on every individual by Rome; thus, it was viewed as submission to atheistic Caesar by the Jewish leaders. Jesus points out that the problem with the vexing tax is that it is not perceived in its proper sphere, as an element within one of two realms or kingdoms, both of which are extensions of the power of God.

The central thought in the text is that God is the authority behind both the civil kingdom and the kingdom of grace. The goal of the sermon is to encourage the hearer to perceive his daily life as a response to God in both kingdoms.

Introduction: In our text for today, we find Jesus being threatened by the crafty entanglements of the religious leaders of that day. They sought to catch the Lord on the horns of a dilemma concerning the obligation to God over against obligation to the government. Behind this effort at entrapment stands the devil, whose crafty and subtle ways still beguile the Christian with this same dilemma. So it is well that we learn from our Lord the answer to the question,

What Shall I Render?

I. To Whom Are We to Render Our Due?

- A. Jesus sets forward the "Two Kingdom" concept.
 - 1. In response to the question, He sets forward the dichotomy (v. 21).
 - 2. Thus, we have two kinds of obligations.
- B. Our Lord teaches that God is over the two kingdoms.
 - 1. In the text His authority enforces both obligations.
 - 2. Elsewhere He expresses God's authority over the civil realm (John 19:11).
- C. Thus, *all* obligations are to God, expressed in two ways.
 - 1. In the realm of civil order - by obedience to civil law, e.g., taxes.
 - 2. In the realm of grace - by our response to the Gospel, e.g., speaking the words of v. 16 from hearts of faith.

II. How Shall We Render Our Due?

- A. What to render to Caesar:
 - 1. First, *not* what is God's.
 - a. Worship is God's, not Caesar's (though many seem to worship "national" interests).
 - b. Unconditional loyalty is God's, not Caesar's ("my country, right or wrong").
 - 2. Rather, the government's due.
 - a. Obedience to civil law.
 - b. Support of and contribution to social order.
 - c. Participation in the affairs of state (elections in three weeks).
- B. What to render to God:
 - 1. Repentance for misguided loyalties, wherein we tempt God (v. 18).
 - 2. The "sacrifice of thanksgiving" (Ps. 119:12-19).
 - 3. The support of the work of the kingdom of grace.

The powers ordained by Thee With heavenly wisdom bless;
May they Thy servants be And rule in righteousness!

The Church of Thy dear Son In flame with love's pure fire;
Bind her once more in one And life and truth inspire.

Though vile and worthless, still Thy people, Lord, are we;
And for our God we will None other have but Thee. Amen.

RWS

**THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY:
MATTHEW 22:34-40
(OCTOBER 22, 1978)**

This pericope immediately follows that in which Jesus silenced the Sadducees. It is unlikely, though, that Lenski's suggestion is correct, that the Pharisees are now engaged in a more "friendly" encounter with Jesus. Such a view neglects the force of the question concerning the great commandment as a "test" (v. 35), as well as the pattern of conflict with Christ which Matthew is highlighting in the immediate context. Therefore, the "test" is put to Jesus, not simply to see if He has converted to the Pharisees' cause as a result of His encounter with the Sadducees, but rather to provide, as in all other efforts of the Pharisees, some basis upon which to defeat Jesus' teaching and to divide His support among the people. The answer which Jesus gives is a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 6:5, drawing the hearer's attention to the all-encompassing, and therefore "great," nature of this commandment. The second great commandment is taken from Lev. 19:18, a summary statement to "second table" commandments. Thus, our Lord demonstrates that the proper view of the Law, far from being legalistic, comprehends the overarching unity in the commandments of God.

The central thought in this text is that God's law is unified, all-encompassing, and totally demanding. The problem for the Pharisees was an inadequate understanding of the Law, whereby they neglected its full force for their lives; the modern listener, too, faces this problem. Thus, the goal of the sermon is to perceive a greater understanding of God's Law; its demands, its description of righteousness, and its function for daily Christian living.

Introduction: The religious leaders of Jesus' day sought to discredit Him through the question raised in our text: Which is the great commandment? This question was supposed to split Jesus' supporters and give His opponents grounds upon which to disagree with whatever choice He made. Instead, Jesus focuses on the unity of God's Law. Thus, our text brings us to

See the Blessings in the Law of God!

I. Jesus Brings Us to Stand Before the Law.

A. As a picture of the whole law, the summary applies:

1. To the religious leaders, though they failed to see it.
2. To us, as the measure of our obedience.

B. The summary of the two tables condemns us.

1. The demand of the first is too all-inclusive.
 - a. All of heart, soul, and mind (considered separately).
 - b. Thus, the total personality (considered together).
2. The demand of the second table is beyond us. We turn the golden rule from a measure of God's will to a bargain of self-will.

C. Thus, we see our condition through these "great commandments."

II. We See How We Stand Before God in Christ.

- A. Christ came to fulfil this great commandment.
 - 1. He came to accomplish and fulfil the Law (Matt. 5:17, 18).
 - 2. His preaching sharpened the Law (Matt 5:48).
- B. He vicariously fulfils it for us.
 - 1. Jeremiah prophesies it: The Lord is our Righteousness (Jer. 33:16).
 - 2. Christ assumes this role (Matt 3:15).
 - 3. Paul declares it (Romans 3:21-24).
- C. Therefore, in these great commandments we see our standing before God in Christ.

III. By the Spirit's power, we see in these commandments our daily opportunities.

- A. For He gives the Christian the power to love God.
 - 1. The guilt which binds the heart is removed by grace.
 - 2. The motivation of gratitude is directed by the first table.
- B. For He gives the Christian the power to love others.
 - 1. The fear which poisons our good works is forgiven.
 - 2. Thus, the heart is free to regard others above self.
- C. Therefore, in these great Commandments we see our opportunities to respond to God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Though the Pharisees misunderstood and misused God's Law, and though they only sought to entrap our Lord by their question, Jesus has given to us a clear view of our blessings from God's Law: we have seen our need of Christ, our standing in His righteousness, and our opportunities to express our gratitude in spirit-motivated service and obedience.

RWS

THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 25:1-13 (OCTOBER 29, 1978)

Note that this parable begins as though its point will have to do with the kingdom of glory, when in fact its point is directed to the kingdom of grace (v. 1). The parable pictures Jewish marriage customs, where the bridegroom, upon betrothal, went to prepare the home for his wife, then to return to take her from her father's home to their new home, where the consummation of the wedding is celebrated. The function of the maidens is to give light to the wedding procession with their lamps. The preacher will want to mark and avoid the temptation to spiritualize the "oil" (v. 3, 4) which the foolish neglected and the wise possessed. Often this "oil" is mistakenly treated as faith; others seem to suggest that it is Christian living (Lenski: "We prefer to think of faith and its works as being the flame of the lamp, the grace and the power of Christ in His Word as the oil, and the outward forms of Christianity as the lamps"). The text reveals that the necessary commodity (in the parable, oil) is what distinguished those who were welcomed to the feast from those who were rejected. For the Christian that necessary commodity is the righteousness of Christ (cf. the wedding garment, Matthew 22:11-13). The delay of the bridegroom (v. 5) is not to be a matter encouraging neglect, but rather a fact which underlies the point of the parable: you should be supplied now for the future.

Thus, the central thought of the text is that each person needs to possess Christ's righteousness by faith now in order to be ready for our Lord's return. The goal of the sermon is to lead the hearer to understand and accept by faith the righteousness of Christ which he must have when our Lord returns.

Introduction: In the text we find another of Jesus' "kingdom parables." In

some of these parables, He points our thoughts toward the Church and its task. In others, He directs our attention to the individual Christian in his relationship to the Heavenly Father. In still others of the Kingdom parables, Jesus directs our thoughts towards what heaven will be like. Today's parable may appear to the casual observer to be one of the latter kinds of kingdom parables, but such is not the case. Jesus does not speak primarily about heaven in this text, but rather He focuses our attention, in view of His return, on our present, daily existence, as He urges us to

Be Ready Now!

I. Be Ready for the Demands of His Return.

- A. When the Bridegroom returns, He demands lighted lamps from the maidens.
 - 1. The lamps were part of the wedding feast.
 - 2. Those without lights did not get in.
- B. When Christ returns, He demands a saving relationship with God from those who wait for Him.
 - 1. This relationship is necessary for the heavenly celebration.
 - 2. Without it, no one will enter into eternal life.

II. Be Ready with the Necessary Commodity.

- A. For the maidens, the necessary commodity was oil.
 - 1. The foolish maidens neglected the role they were to play in the wedding celebration.
 - 2. The wise maidens perceived the necessary commodity for their role.
- B. For we who wait the Lord's return, the necessary commodity is righteousness.
 - 1. It is foolish to neglect the role which we have in God's kingdom (Eph. 1:3-6).
 - 2. It is wise to grasp the necessary commodity prepared for us (Romans 3:23-26).
- C. Now is the time for wise persons to be ready (2 Cor. 5:21-6:2).

The parable in our text for today is not merely an informative picture of what the future will bring. Rather, it is a gracious call to us from our Lord Himself to *be ready now*, possessing that pure commodity of His righteousness by which we shall shine with the brightness of His light in the halls of eternity.

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head.
Amen.

RWS

THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY:

MATTHEW 25:14-30
(NOVEMBER 5, 1978)

The pericope discusses watchfulness in terms of faithfulness in using the gifts God has given us. The Lord's return is unknown to us, and since He will demand a reckoning, the lesson is of the greatest importance. Verse 15: Each talent is worth about \$1,200. The number of talents given to each corresponds with the business ability of each. Verse 18: The servant with the one talent lacked both energy and enterprise. Verses 19-23: The two who doubled their investment are praised and given larger areas of responsibility. The devotion

and fidelity of the two men are the same. Verse 24: The man with one talent tries to put the blame on the master. He describes him as hard, avaricious, grasping, ungenerous. The problem of the man with the one talent is laziness together with a lack of appreciation of the opportunities offered him. He did not even put the money in the bank. Verse 28: The man's one talent is given to the man with ten (cf. Mt. 13:12). Verse 29: The reward of success is further success, while the penalty of failure goes to enrich the successful; this principle is true in the temporal as well as the spiritual field. Verse 30 contains the judgment of condemnation upon the one.

The interpretation of the parable: The rich man is God. The servants are those who profess faith in Him. God gives spiritual gifts—the means of grace, the Holy Spirit, all Christian virtues and abilities. Spiritual gifts are to be used in His service, 1 Pet. 4:10. God wants us to work in His service and so prepare for His coming. He promises a reward of grace. But woe to the slothful servant. He shows that he cares nothing for grace. This pericope is a rebuke both of the religious leaders of Christ's day and of the slothful church member today. Kretzmann: "There are few excuses so poor and so miserable in sound as those by which professing Christians attempt to evade work in the church." What a warning is the sentence of doom upon the slothful. Where there is no work, there is no faith. Where there is no faith, there is no salvation.

Introduction: When someone asked Luther what he would do if he knew the Lord would come the following day, Luther replied, "I would plant a tree." This pericope teaches us that we are to

Work While We Wait for Christ's Return

- I. Because our talents are gifts of grace to be used for God's glory.
 - A. The householder gives talents.
 1. He divides them as he wills.
 2. He expects the servants to make capital of them.
 - B. God gives gifts, too.
 1. Spiritual gifts: The forgiveness of sins, the hope of heaven. (Cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-11).
 2. Natural and acquired gifts, e.g., the ability to teach, to sing, to do mission work, to administer, etc.
 - C. God expects us to use our gifts to His glory, Ro 12:1; 1 Cor. 6:20; and the good of our neighbor, Mt 5:116-42; 1 Pet. 4:10.

How richly God has endowed us. How diligently we ought to serve Him in works of Christian love.

- II. Because there will be an accounting.
 - A. The householder returns.
 1. The man who gained five talents and the man who gained two are commended.
 2. The man with one talent is censured.
 - a. He tries to blame the Master.
 - b. The fact is that the man was lazy.
 - B. Our Lord will return for a public accounting, Mt. 25:31-44.
 1. Those who demonstrate their faith in works of love will receive heaven as a gift of God's grace, Mt. 25:34-40.
 2. Those who produce no works as the fruit of faith will be cast out, Mt. 25:41-46.

What a fearful doom! What a solemn warning! God has given us so much in Christ. Let us work while we wait for His return.

HJE

**THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 23:1-12
(NOVEMBER 12, 1978)**

Chapter 23 of Matthew is one of the most scathing denunciations from the mouth of Jesus. Verse 1: Scribes and Pharisees were doubtless present also. Verse 2: The Scribes and Pharisees were teachers of the law, an extension of Moses' prophetic office. Verse 3: The people were to obey them when they commanded God's Word. But they were not to follow their example because they did not practice what they preached. Verse 4: The heavy burdens were their three hundred and sixty-five man-made ordinances, one for each day in the year. The Pharisees burdened others with these, but failed to keep them themselves. That made them hypocrites. Verse 5: The Pharisees had a passion for honor among men. In public the Pharisees were models of piety. They were actors, hypocrites. They made broad their phylacteries (Dt. 6:8): God commanded the Jews to bind His words for a sign upon the hand and as frontlets between the eyes. Phylacteries, or remembrances, were strips of vellum or parchment, one inch wide and 12 to 18 inches long, on which were written Dt 11:13-21; 6:4-9; Ex 13:1-10; 11-16; these strips were placed in tiny boxes, one fastened to the forehead for the mind, one to the left arm for the heart. The Pharisees made these phylacteries large, increasing either the size of the letters or size of the boxes. Nu 15:37-40 commands the Jews to fasten strips as fringes on their garments. Verses from the Law were woven into those strips. The Pharisees made these fringes wide and conspicuous to prove their zeal for the Law. Verses 6-7: The Pharisees loved the first sofa at a meal, and the seat reserved for the elders in the synagogue. They enjoyed being called rabbi, a sickening ambition. Verses 8-10: Humility is required. Christ singles out His disciples for this section. Only Christ holds the rank of Master. His disciples are all equally brethren, Ga 3:28; Col 3:11. Titles in the church are titles of courtesy, never of divine right. Verse 11: Greatness before Christ is humility of service toward Him and one's neighbor. Verse 12: Whoever exalts himself will be excluded from the Kingdom: whoever humbles himself, serving from love of God in faith, will be exalted.

The Law of the Kingdom

- I. Whosoever exalts himself will be abased.
 - A. The proud man exalts himself before God.
 1. The Pharisees had all the trappings of pride.
 - a. They demanded that others keep their laws but did not keep them themselves.
 - b. They did their work only to be seen.
 - c. They loved the prominent places at banquets.
 - d. They gloried in being called Rabbi.
 2. The modern Pharisee.
 - a. Is blind to his sinfulness, seeing only his imagined virtue, Lk 18:9-14.
 - b. He does good, but only to win the praise of men.
 - B. The proud now will be abased.
 1. As the Pharisees spurned Christ, so proud men today feel no need of a Savior, Mt. 5:20.
 2. Hence, the proud are abased, excluded from the kingdom, Mt 25:41.

This is a solemn warning to us all. It is so easy to be a Pharisee; it is so tragic to be a Pharisee.

II. He that humbles himself will be exalted.

A. The characteristics of the humble man.

1. He rejoices that God is his Father.
 - a. Who has not dealt with us after our sins.
 - b. Who in mercy sent His Son to be the Savior of the world, Jn 3:16.
2. He trusts in Christ as His Master.
 - a. Christ came to conquer men's enemies: sin, death and the devil, 1 Cor 15:55-58.
 - b. By faith in Christ the Christian knows that he has the forgiveness of sins, Ro 4:5.
3. The Christian manifests his faith in Christian service, 1 Jn 4:11; 1 Jn 3:14-18.

B. The humble man will be exalted.

1. In this life: we are branches in Christ, Jn 15; sheep of the one Shepherd, Jn 10; children of God, Ro 8:16.
2. In the life to come, Mt 25:34.

What a strong incentive our exalted position by God's grace ought to be to us to remain humble in our relationships with God and our neighbor.

HJE

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 24:1-14 (NOVEMBER 19, 1978)

Verses 1-2: The Jerusalem temple was a magnificent sight. It is small wonder that this group of Galileans looked with awe on these vast stones. Jesus used the occasion to direct their attention to some weighty matters. In this twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew our Lord speaks both of the more immediately impending destruction of Jerusalem with its temple and also of the close of the age when He returns in glory. The former serves in a sense as a type or prefigurement of the latter.

Verse 3: *Parousia*, as a term denoting the Second Coming of Christ, is quite common in the rest of the New Testament but in the Gospels it occurs only in this chapter (vv. 3, 27, 37, 29). It is the word used elsewhere to describe the arrival of a governor into his province or the coming of a king to his subjects. *Parousia* describes Jesus' coming in royal authority and power; He returns as King! Jesus gives His disciples the sign which they request, although it may not be the type of sign they had in mind. It is a sign which relates all of history to His coming.

Verses 4-5: The history of Israel is a sign. The Qumran discoveries, for example, give evidence of the fevered messianism in the air at the time of Jesus. We can note in particular the false messianic expectations, and the tragic end of such expectations, of the people who rejected the true Messiah. A graphic example is the rebellion (A.D. 132-5) of Bar Kokhba, 'Son of a Star,' in whom Rabbi Akiba saw the messianic fulfillment of Num. 24:17.

Verses 6-8: The history of the world is a sign. "These disasters are the iron footfalls of the God who marches toward ultimate judgment" (Franzmann). Yet they are only a prelude to the glorious new age. Jesus calls them, literally, "a beginning of birth-pangs." Jesus adopts the term used by the rabbis to designate the woes they thought would precede the Messiah's coming and shows that these 'birth-pangs' point to His Second Coming which will inaugurate the splendid new age.

Verses 9-14: The history of the church is a sign. Jesus points to persecution from without which will lead to apostasy, and to false teachers from within

who will draw believers away from the truth. The danger to disciples in all of this is that their "love will grow cold." But the encouraging promise holds true: "He who endures to the end will be saved." In many respects the key to the entire pericope is the last verse. "This Gospel of the kingdom" is the Good News of everything that God has done in Jesus Christ to establish His gracious rule in the hearts and lives of people everywhere. It is the proclamation of this message that marks the on-going activity of the church throughout the entire period of history until the end. As long as there are "signs" to observe it is incumbent upon the church to keep on proclaiming this message.

The "sign" of Jesus' coming is encouragement to

Keep On Proclaiming

- I. The history of Israel is encouragement to keep on proclaiming the true Christ.
 - A. The 'sign' of Israel's history:
 1. Israel as a whole rejected the true Messiah.
 2. Israel experienced the tragedy of following false messianic hopes.
 - B. Proclaim the true Messiah!
 1. Jesus is the fulfillment of genuine messianic hopes.
 2. He died and rose again to be our anointed King.
- II. The history which of the world is encouragement to keep on proclaiming the new age which the returning Christ will inaugurate.
 - A. The 'sign' of the world's history:
 1. Warfare among nations is an indication of God's ultimate judgment.
 2. Catastrophes in nature bear witness that the whole creation is involved in sin's curse.
 - B. Proclaim the new age!
 1. Recognize God's just judgment and repent.
 2. Look forward to God's great new age which comes with Jesus Christ.
- III. The history of the church is encouragement to keep on proclaiming the strengthening and saving message.
 - A. The 'sign' of the church's history:
 1. Persecution leads to apostasy.
 2. False teachers lead believers away from the truth.
 - B. Proclaim the strengthening and saving message!
 1. The King who defeated sin and Satan will keep us faithful in times of stress.
 2. Our Saviour will keep us true to Him and grant us a blessed end.

RJH

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY: MATTHEW 25:31-46 (NOVEMBER 26, 1978)

In view of the fact that this pericope is somewhat parabolic in nature and that certain interpretations have been suggested that are quite unacceptable (e.g., this text presents the way of salvation for non-Christians, namely, love), we preface our study with two clear statements of Scripture: (1) "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom. 3:28); (2) "And without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Heb. 11:6).

In verse 31 "the Son of Man," a title used almost exclusively by Jesus to identify Himself, has its source in Dan. 7. There it refers to the One who comes "with the clouds of heaven" and is given everlasting dominion by the Ancient of Days (vv. 13-14). This same dominion also becomes the possession of the "saints of the Most High" (vv. 18, 22, 27). As Jesus applies the term to Himself He incorporates characteristics of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (Mt. 20:18-19, 28), as well as the aspects of judgement and heavenly dominion from Daniel (Mt. 13:41-2; 19:28; 26:64). It is this latter aspect that comes to the fore in our text. The solidarity between "the Son of Man" and the "saints of the Most High" which we note in Dan. 7 is perhaps reflected (but from the perspective of the Servant) in the identity of Jesus with "the least" of his brethren.

In verses 32-33 the whole human race is assembled, but the picture of the text is not a trial scene. It is too late for that. It is in life as we live it today that the crisis of faith or unbelief occurs. The judgment and sentence are now being carried out. In verse 34 the "King" is the Son of Man who has received the everlasting kingdom. The blessed state of those on the right is due, not to themselves, but to the Father of the King. In them God's long counsels of salvation reach their goal. In verses 35-36 the word "for" indicates that these works are decisive in the final judgment "not because of an inherent meritorious quality, but because of their evidential quality" (Lenski). Since it is a *public* judgment, such external evidence as works (which faith alone is able to produce) is offered. Jesus is both Judge and the basis for judgment; relationship to Him is primary. Love shown to the brother is a reflex of our response to the King's grace.

In verses 37-39 the "righteous" are those who have God's verdict in their favour. "When?" - the question shows how far they were from any thought of merit. They kept no record of their works but trusted in grace. We learn what a great thing divine forgiveness is: the King remembers only the good we have done and sees in our little deeds of mercy, done in faith, an affirmation of our relationship to Him. Verse 40: Jesus identifies Himself with the humblest of His followers, those who have nothing to distinguish them except that they were believers in Him.

Verses 41-45 are the direct opposite of vv. 34-40. We note that the eternal fire was not made for men; God sent His Son that all men might be saved. But "when men refuse the Messianic mercy, they thwart God's wide and sweeping purposes, commit themselves to the Enemy of God, and make an alien doom their own" (Franzmann). In not a single case was there a motive the King could recognize as an intention to trust or accept Him. They too ask "When?" but the attitude is: If we had known it was *you*, we would gladly have helped (meaning, in order to benefit ourselves). Here Jesus omits "My brethren." The righteous helped each other as brethren of Christ; the damned acknowledged neither Christ nor His brothers. They never saw Christ the King when they came into contact with believers.

In verse 46 "eternal" refers to both punishment and life: "hell is as eternal as is heaven; heaven no more so than hell" (Lenski).

Introductory thought: Judgment Day will be a day of surprises, surprises both for the saved and for the lost. But then, we have a most surprising King!

Trust Your King for a Glorious Surprise

I. The Judge of all men is a surprising King; he identifies with us in our lowliness that we might share with Him in His glory.

A. He is the Son of Man who, as the Servant of the Lord, came to suffer for our sins and is not ashamed to call us "brethren" (Mt. 20:18-19; Heb. 2:11).

- B. This Son of Man is the King who comes in glory to grant us a share in His kingdom but will also execute God's judgment on the world.
- C. In the meantime the King confronts us with His grace in Word and Sacrament and gives us the opportunity to respond to Him in His needy brethren.
- II. The King, therefore, surprises the righteous with words of praise.
 - A. His "come" invites those who have been blest and declared righteous by His Father.
 - B. In earthly life they trusted the King who encountered them in grace.
 - C. Now He surprises them with praise for their deeds of love - all else is forgiven and forgotten.
 - D. God's long counsels of salvation reach their goal in them.
- III. And He surprises the rejected with words of judgment.
 - A. His "depart" rejects those who now bear the Father's curse.
 - B. In earthly life their concerns were primarily for themselves and their own benefit.
 - C. He now surprises them with condemnation because they had rejected His grace.
 - D. By rejecting the King's grace they have made an alien doom their own.

For a glorious surprise, therefore, trust the King in His grace now!

R.H.

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT: MATTHEW 21:1-9 (DECEMBER 3, 1978)

The Advent season proclaims the coming King. We are reminded that the church lives between the two advents of the Christ. We glance back at the One who came. We look forward and long to receive the King who is coming again. The one coming affects the other. To the degree that we in faith embrace the Christ who came, we are to the same degree prepared for His coming again. One of the stumbling blocks to receiving Christ properly is His meekness. We bear in mind that with the help of the fulfilled prophecy, Zechariah 9:9, the entry of Jesus depicted the King of salvation as the King of peace. Here he stands violently opposed to all the champions of a political messianism. He comes in "meekness," i.e., with no means of power, no trappings of royalty, on a bowed beast, with nothing and no one but God to depend on. He who trusted in the Lord will be vindicated by the Lord. He comes to the people of Jerusalem and also to the people of today, met by those who are hostile, those who are misguided and ignorant, and by those who are of the faithful remnant. Those who in meekness receive the meek King are those who trust in the Lord, who commit their ways to the Lord, who trust Him, confident that He will bring forth their vindication. They are those who are ever before the Lord and wait patiently for Him, Psalm 37:3-11.

Your King is Come, How will You Receive Him?

- I. Your King Is Come.
 - A. Christ's dramatic claim to a Messianic Kingship.
 - 1. The nature of the kingdom.
 - 2. The role of the Messiah.
 - B. He is come in meekness.
 - 1. A meekness that cannot mask or hide His true identity and nature.
 - 2. A meekness essential to the accomplishment of His God-appointed mission—the redemptive act.

II. How Will You Receive Him?

- A. As those who are hostile?
 - 1. Caiaphas' decision: "It is expedient that one man die for the people."
 - 2. Christ's awareness of what was about to happen to Him, Lk 18:32,33.
 - 3. Do we feel threatened by Jesus?
 - a. By Jesus' intervention in our lives.
 - b. By the requirements of discipleship.
 - c. Do we tend to resent God's "interference"?
- B. As those who were misguided or misled?
 - 1. As sheep without a shepherd.
 - 2. As those who wanted to make Him "king."
 - 3. As those captivated by the fervor and exuberance of the moment.
- C. As those who were part of the faithful remnant?
 - 1. Not ashamed of Jesus' meekness.
 - 2. Realizing our own need.
 - 3. Longing for a Savior and the forgiveness and life He brings.
 - 4. Living out our life in meekness and thus prepared for His coming again.

NHM

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT: LUKE 21:25-36 (DECEMBER 10, 1978)

The thrust of Advent is two-fold. It not only points us back to the first coming of our Lord but it also points the people of God forward to Christ's second coming. There has always been much speculation and useless argumentation concerning the second coming, but the one great truth is that history is going somewhere. History has a goal and at that goal Jesus Christ will be Lord of all. That is all we know and all we need to know. There is the danger that we may become so tied to the world that the only thing that makes life tolerable is "drunkenness and glut" and the only thing that makes life meaningful is "materialism." Both pleasures and cares can cause us to take our eyes off the coming Lord and shift our priorities, and so can imperil our eternal salvation.

That We May Stand in That Day

- I. Pray to Remain Alert.
 - A. In the faith and certainty of the Lord's coming again.
 - 1. The witness of the Scriptures.
 - 2. The Word and promise of our Lord Himself.
 - B. Perceptive of the signs.
 - 1. Cosmological signs.
 - 2. Political signs.
 - 3. Personal and interpersonal signs.
 - C. Perceiving also the nearness.
 - 1. We interpret signs in nature.
 - 2. Be equally perceptive of the signs of Christ's near return.
- II. Pray to Remain Clear-headed.
 - A. The twin dangers of pleasure-seeking and materialism.
 - 1. The danger of dissipation and drunkenness: the only thing that makes life tolerable is the pursuit of pleasure.
 - 2. The danger of thinking that life has meaning only in materialism.

- B. Both divert attention, dissipate energies, and imperil our eternal salvation.
 - 1. Our attention is diverted.
 - 2. Our trust and confidence become misplaced.
 - 3. We seek the highest good apart from Jesus Christ.
- III. Pray to Be Found Worthy.
 - A. Found worthy because we know that His second coming is tied intimately to God's redemptive purpose.
 - B. Worthy to stand confident and assured.
 - 1. Not in our own worthiness.
 - 2. But in the imputed worthiness (righteousness) of Christ.

NHM

**THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT: MATTHEW 11:2-10
(DECEMBER 17, 1978)**

John the Baptizer was the way-preparer of the coming Christ. In a very real sense the ministry of today's pastors is that of preparing the way for Christ's second coming. The text gives us a remarkable insight into John the Baptizer. John is imprisoned in the dungeon of the fortress Machaerus near the Dead Sea. From there and for whatever reason, the interpretations are several, John sends disciples to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who was to come or should we look for another?" John is directed to the things that Jesus is teaching and doing, and by these things he is summoned to a renewed commitment with the statement, "Blessed is the man who does not take offense at me." Jesus' commendation of John is unparalleled in the New Testament. Thus Christ Himself holds up John as a model for pastors of His Church to imitate.

John the Model for Pastors

- I. The Pastor's Need to Grow.
 - A. He may well be assailed by questions and temptations.
 - B. He is refreshed by what he has heard and seen of Jesus.
 - C. There is a mutual ministry of growth around Christ by pastor and people.
- II. The Pastor's Need for Perseverance.
 - A. There is a temptation to stumble at what is required of him by the Lord.
 - B. In Christ.
 - 1. He finds strength for every situation.
 - 2. He finds new blessedness.
- III. The Pastor's Need for Integrity.
 - A. Integrity of principle—no "reed shaken in the wind."
 - 1. He will apply God's will consistently to his own life.
 - 2. He will be firm and evangelical in his application of God's will to the lives of his people.
 - 3. He will resist the temptation to look the other way or to compromise.
 - B. Integrity of ministry—not "one who lives in kings' palaces."
 - 1. He will minister to the whole flock, be a champion of the poor and the lonely, and resist currying the favor of those who are rich and influential.
 - 2. He will resist the temptation to feather his own nest.
 - C. Integrity of message—"a prophet, yea more than a prophet."
 - 1. He will teach and preach the whole counsel of God.

2. He will resist the temptation to preach in such a way as to "satisfy itching ears."
3. He will speak the message in a clear, certain tone.

NHM

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT: JOHN 1:19-28
(DECEMBER 24, 1978)

The Fourth Sunday in Advent comes on the day of Christmas Eve this year. The temptation will be to combine this day with Christmas. Such an anticipation would preempt an important aspect of our Advent preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord. The Gospel for the Third Sunday in Advent (Matt. 11:2-10) represented the disciples of the imprisoned Baptizer as sent by him to Jesus to ask for an authentication of His Messianic office and work. This Sunday's Gospel shows us this same John, bearing witness himself to the Incarnate Lord and directing the priests and Levites to anticipate His coming.

The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel is followed by a description of the witness (*martyria*) which John bears concerning the Christ. The Evangelist has already drawn attention to this *martyria* in vv 6ff. By it men are brought to faith in Christ. The term *martyria* plays an important role in the Johannine writings: witness to Christ is given by the Baptizer (1:7, 19, 29), by Christ Himself (8:13), by the Heavenly Father (1 John 5:9), the Apostles (3 John 12), and the heavenly Church (Rev. 12:11). John comes preaching repentance and water-baptism in token of that repentance and divine forgiveness. In the eyes of the multitudes, he is Elijah *Redivivus* and the fulfilment of the Mosaic promises that the Lord would raise up a prophet like him in the latter days (Deut. 18:15). John himself claims no such role for himself, although our Lord clearly asserts that he is indeed "more than a prophet" "the messenger of the Lord" (cf. Mal. 3:1), and "the returned Elijah" (Matt. 9:9, 10, 14; Lk. 7:26f.). A basic theme in the appearance and witness of the Baptizer, then, is the recognition of a divinely ordained continuity between the aim of the Old Testament and the message of the New Testament. The child born of the Virgin this night is the fulfilment of the plan and purpose of God to which the prophets from Moses and Elijah to John the Baptist have borne their unique *martyria*.

The Forerunner Announces the Approaching Lord

- I. The place of John. He is the last and greatest of the prophets of the Lord: "The greatest man born of woman" (Matt. 11). Like all true prophets, he bears witness to the purposes of God. His witness stands supreme, for he is the ordained "forerunner of the Lord."
- II. The Witness of John. Chapter one of the Fourth Gospel shows us three aspects of the witness of the Baptizer. First, He confesses his own unworthiness and disclaims any high office in the purposes of God. He describes himself as a simple witness: a lone voice calling in the waste places, summoning all to repentance. Secondly, he points forward to the Coming Christ who is already near at hand. It is this Christ who is the Worthy One of God. Thirdly, in the verses which immediately follow this pericope, he identifies Jesus to his own disciples as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."
- III. The Lord of John. The One to whom John points and for whom he waits

is the Lord whose holy birth in Bethlehem of Judea we are preparing to celebrate. The Lord is indeed near at hand. We are among those to whom John points Him out. He summons us to make ready the way before Him by repentance, and sincere confession, and living faith.

C. J. Evanson

CHRISTMAS: LUKE 2:1-14
(DECEMBER 25, 1978)

The Church of the Lutheran Reformation knew three services of the Feast of Christmas: the Service of the Angels (*Engelamt*) at Midnight, the Service of the Shepherds (*Hirtenamt*) at dawn, and the Service of Mankind (*Menschenamt*) at the culmination of the Christmas celebration. The Common Service of 1888 placed the propers for these three services in an unusual arrangement: the Angel-Office is called the "Early Service," the Shepherd-Office is called "Second Christmas Day," and the Office of Mankind is called the "Late Service." *The Lutheran Liturgy* of the Synodical Conference eliminates the propers for the "Late Service." This is unfortunate because the Gospel appointed for that office was the beautiful Johannine Prologue (John 1:1-14). The Gospel which remains to us in *The Lutheran Liturgy* is that of "Early Service," the Lukan birth narrative.

Heresies ancient and modern have sought to separate the historical aspects of the person and work of Christ from their supposed significance. Early heretics did so on the basis of a dualism which regarded the earthly and temporal as degrading and insignificant, whereas many more modern scholars have taken the same approach on the basis of their supposition that the authentic record of the earthly, historical circumstances of the life and ministry of Christ are neither available nor necessary.

One is immediately struck by the starkly historical nature of the Lukan narrative. The Evangelist is supremely concerned with the specific, historical circumstances which surround the birth of our Lord. On the basis of Luke's evidence, we are able to determine with some precision when the holy birth took place. It was around the year 7 B.C. that Quirinius came to power in the East. Our Lord was likely born in that very year. Contemporary documents from Egypt provide an independent witness to the fact that each person was required to return to his hometown for the great census-taking about which Luke speaks. It is evident that Luke is concerned that we understand that he is speaking of an historical occurrence. As the Incarnate Lord is both God and Man in one person, so the message of the Gospel is an inexorable union of the temporal and eternal. We cannot disregard the manger-crib and the stable. Nor should we sentimentalize the circumstances and reduce the narrative to a kind of "Night the Animals Talked" fairy-tale.

Incarnation—Our Lord in the Flesh and Blood of Man

- I. The angels praise God for what He has done for us. To us a Saviour is born, a Son is given. He comes in stillness, because only in quietness can we hear the voice and Word of God. He comes in darkness, for without God we are blinded by ambitions and cares. He comes as a child to make us the children of God.
- II. The angels point the way to the shepherds. We too find Him in the manger. For us, the stable is the Church; the manger is the altar of His Sacrament. It is our joy to be comforted by His Real Presence among us. It is a sacramental presence, and the fruit of it is not emotional life, but

a new life in communion with God - a new life of forgiveness and eternal hope.

- III. The angels sing for us, Gabriel announced a message of joy to the Virgin Mary. The Angels announce it now to you and me. It is to us that God gives His Son. Through Him we may live forever in the love of heaven, for Christ opens the gate of heaven for us on this holy night.

CJE

THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS: LUKE 2:33-40
(DECEMBER 31, 1978)

There are drops of blood on all our "White Christmases." The incarnation of our Lord moves from the earliest moments towards the cross which always dominates the horizons in the Holy Gospel. Here this Gospel is proclaimed by two "Senior citizens" who have made the temple of God their constant habitation. The pericope takes up the narrative of the infancy of our Lord with the closing words of the report of the events which took place on the fortieth day after the birth of Christ, the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple and the Purification of the Virgin Mary (February 2, Candlemas). On this day Jesus was taken by Mary and Joseph to the temple, where, according to the Law (Lev. 12; Num. 6; Ex. 13), an offering was to be brought to "redeem" the first-born, and the ritual purification of the mother was accomplished. Aged Simeon has here seen the Christ of God, in fulfilment of the promise which he had earlier received, and he has sung his *Nunc Dimittis* (our familiar post-Communion anthem). Now he takes the Christ Child up in his arms and prophesies His coming passion and death. After him comes the prophetess Anna, who proclaims Him the fulfilment of the promise of redemption. Again the Evangelist is concerned to show the essential *continuity* between the Old and New Testaments. The birth and appearance of the Christ specifically fulfils the ancient promises of God, as these aged children of God attest.

The Gospel According to the Senior Citizens

- I. Like Simeon, we must recognize and confess this Child to be the Christ of God. Only faith makes it possible to do this. He is set for the rise of those who believe and the fall of those who do not believe. He is forever the great stumbling block. We look upon the Christ, like Simeon, and confess that He is the Rock of our Faith: the sign of God's mercy and grace; the sign by which we are led to God; the sign in whom we receive all God's blessings.
- II. Like Anna, we must continually serve God. To refuse to do so would be unbelief. The temple of God must be our home; here we receive sight to see the glory hidden in a baby's garments.
- III. In Christ, we must increase in wisdom and understanding. The world pretends to know everything. People are driven by pride. Faithful Christians must be otherwise; we of all people are most deeply aware of our sins and transgressions. We are driven to the Saviour and the fellowship of His mercy. The appearance of the Christ-Child reminds us that the promises of God have not failed. This is our great joy. We come to His altar, and return refreshed, singing with St. Simeon: 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace. . . '

CJE