

Sermons
of
Martin Luther

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Sermons on Epistle Texts
for Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost

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First Sunday In Lent

Text, Second Corinthians 6, 1-10.

1 And working together with him we entreat also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain 2 (for he saith, At an acceptable time I hearkened unto thee, and in a day of salvation did I succor thee: behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation): 3 giving no occasion of stumbling in anything, that our ministration be not blamed; 4 but in everything commending ourselves, as ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, 5 in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; 6 in pureness, in knowledge, in longsuffering, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in love unfeigned, 7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the armor of righteousness on the right hand on the left, 8 by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

AN ENTREATY TO LIVE AS CHRISTIANS.

1. This lesson is an admonition to the Corinthians calculated to stimulate them in the performance of the duties they already recognize. The words are easily enough said, but execution is difficult and practice rare. For Paul gives a strange description of the Christian life, and the color and characteristics with which he exhibits it render it decidedly unprepossessing. First he says:

“And working together with him we entreat also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.”

2. He calls the Corinthians co-workers, as in First Corinthians 3, 9, where he puts it: “We are God’s fellow-workers; ye are God’s husbandry, God’s building.” That is, we labor upon you with the external Word—teaching and admonishing; but God, working inwardly through the Spirit, gives the blessing and the success. He permits not our labor with the outward Word to be in vain. Therefore, God is the true Master, performing inwardly the supreme work, while we aid outwardly, serving him through the ministry.

The apostle’s purpose in praising his co-laborers is to prevent them from despising the external Word as something inessential to them, or well enough known. For though God is able to effect everything without the instrumentality of the outward Word, working inwardly by his Spirit, this is by no means his purpose. He uses preachers as fellow-workers, or co-laborers, to accomplish his purpose through the Word when and where he pleases. Now, since preachers have the office, name and honor of fellow-workers with God, no one may be considered learned enough or holy enough to ignore or despise the most inferior preaching; especially since he knows not when the hour may come wherein God will, through preachers, perform his work in him.

3. Secondly, Paul shows the danger of neglecting the grace of God. He boldly declares here that the preaching of the Gospel is not an eternal, continuous and permanent mode of instruction, but rather a passing shower, which hastens on. What it strikes, it strikes; what it misses, it misses. It does not return, nor does it stand still. The sun and heat follow and dry it up. Experience shows that in no part of the world has the Gospel remained pure beyond the length of man’s memory. Only so long as its pioneers lived did it stand and prosper. When they were gone, the light disappeared; factious spirits and false teachers followed immediately.

Thus Moses announces (Deut 31, 29) that the children of

Israel will corrupt themselves after his death; and the book of Judges testifies that so it really came to pass. Each time a judge died in whose days the Word of God obtained sway, the people fell away and became more wicked than before. King Joash did what was right so long as the high priest Jehoiada lived, but after the latter's death this had an end. And following the time of Christ and his apostles, the world was filled with seditious spirits and false teachers. Paul, in fact, declares (Acts 20, 29): "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock." So also we now have the pure Gospel. This is a time of grace and salvation and the acceptable day; but should the world continue, this condition, too, will soon pass.

4. To receive the grace of God in vain can be nothing else than to hear the pure word of God which presents and offers his grace, and yet to remain listless and irresponsive, undergoing no change at all. Thus, ungrateful for the Word and unworthy of it, we merit the loss of the Word. Such as these are described in the parable (Lk 14, 16-24) where the guests bidden to the supper refused to come and went about their own business, thus provoking the master's anger until he swore they should not taste his supper.

Similar is Paul's threat here, that we may take heed and accept the Gospel with fear and gratitude. Christ says (Jn 12, 35), "Walk while ye have the light, that darkness overtake you not." I should think we might have learned wisdom from experience—from the darkness we suffered under the Papacy. But that is all forgotten; we show neither gratitude nor amendment of life. Very well, we shall find out the consequences.

SALVATION WHEREVER THE GOSPEL IS SENT.

"Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

5. These words portray the richness of the salvation wherever the Gospel goes: nothing but grace and help; no wrath or punishment. Indeed, these are words of unutterable meaning the apostle here employs.

First, he tells us that it is an "acceptable time," as the Hebrew expresses it. Our own way of putting it would be: "This is a gracious time, a time when God turns away his wrath and is moved only by love and benevolence toward us and is pleased to do us good." All our sins are forgotten; he takes no note of the sins of the past nor of those of the present. In short, we are in a realm of mercy, where are only forgiveness and reconciliation. The heavens are now open. This is the true golden year when man is denied nothing. So Paul says, "At an acceptable time I hearkened unto thee"; that is: "I am kindly disposed toward thee. Whatsoever thou shalt even desire and ask for, thou shalt surely receive. Be not neglectful, therefore, and ask while the acceptable time continues."

6. Second, Paul declares that it is a day of blessing, "a day of salvation." It is a day of help, wherein we are not only acceptable and assured of God's favor and good will toward us, but we experience even as we have been assured—that God really does help us. He verifies his assurance, for his beneficence gives testimony that our prayers are heard. We call it a happy day, a blessed day, a day of abundance; for these two truths are inseparably related—that God is favorable toward us, and that his kindness is the proof of his favor. God's favor toward us is revealed in the first clause, which speaks of an acceptable time; that he extends help to us is revealed in the second clause, telling of a blessed day of succor. Both these facts are to be apprehended by faith and in good conscience; for a superficial judgment would lead to the view that this period of blessing is rather an accursed period of wrath and disfavor. Words like these, of spiritual meaning, must be understood in the light of the Holy Spirit; thus shall we find that these two glorious, beautiful expressions refer to the Gospel dispensation and are intended to magnify all the treasures and the riches of the kingdom of Christ.

"Giving no occasion of stumbling [no offense] in anything."

7. Since this is a time of blessing, let us make right use

of it, not spending it to no purpose, and let us take serious heed to give offense to none; thus avoiding reproach to our ministry. It is evident from the connection to what kind of offense the apostle has reference; he would not have the Gospel doctrine charged with teaching anything evil.

8. Two kinds of offense bring the Gospel into disgrace: In one case it is the heathen who are offended, and this because of the fact that some individuals would make the Gospel a means of freedom from temporal restraint, substituting temporal liberty for spiritual. They thus bring reproach upon the Gospel as teaching such doctrine, and make it an object of scandal to the heathen and worldly people, whereby they are misled and become enemies to the faith and to the Word of God without cause, being the harder to convert since they regard Christians as licentious knaves. And the responsibility for this must be placed at the door of those who have given offense in this respect.

In the other case, Christians are offended among themselves. The occasion is the indiscreet exercise of Christian liberty, which offends the weak in faith. Concerning this topic much is said in First Corinthians 8 and Romans 14. Paul here hints at what he speaks of in First Corinthians 10, 32-33: "Give no occasion of stumbling, either to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the church of God: even as I also please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of the many that they may be saved." He takes up the same subject in Philippians 2, 4, teaching that every man should look on the things of others. Then no offense will be given.

"That our ministration [the ministry] be not blamed."

9. Who can prevent our office being vilified? for the Word of God must be persecuted equally with Christ himself. That the Word of God is reviled by unbelievers ignorant of faith in God is something we cannot prevent. For, according to Isaiah 8, 14 and Romans 9, 33, the Gospel is a "rock of offense." This is the offense of the faith; it will pursue its course and we are not responsible.

But for love's offense, offense caused by shortcomings in

our works and fruits of faith, the things we are commanded to let shine before men, that, seeing these, they may be allured to the faith—for offense in this respect we cannot disclaim responsibility. It is a sin we certainly must avoid, that the heathen, the Jews, the weak and the rulers of the world may never be able to say: “Behold the knavery and licentiousness of these people! Surely their doctrine cannot be true.” Otherwise our evil name and fame and the obstacles we place before others will extend to the innocent and holy Word God has given us to apprehend and to proclaim; it must bear our shame and in addition become unfruitful in the offended ones. Grievous is such a sin as this.

MARKS OF CHRISTIANS AS MINISTERS OF GOD.

“But in everything commending ourselves, as ministers of God, in much patience.”

10. The apostle here portrays the Christian life in its outward expression. Not that it is possible for anyone thereby to become a Christian, or godly; but, being servants of God, or Christians and godly people, we furnish in this manner, according to Paul’s statement here, the evidence thereof as by fruits and signs.

Mark his phrase “ministers of God.” What a remarkable service for God is this wherein we must endure so much suffering, so much affliction, privation, anxiety, stripes, imprisonment, tumult or sedition, labor, watching, fasting, and so on! No mass here, no vigil, no hallucinations of a fictitious service of God; it is the true service of God, which subdues the body and mortifies the flesh. Not, indeed, as if fasting, watching and toiling are to be despised because they do not make just. Though we are not thereby justified, we must nevertheless practice those things, instead of giving rein to the flesh and indulging our idleness.

11. Paul also mentions sedition. Not that by our teaching or life we should be guilty of sedition against others; rather, we should be quiet and obedient. See Romans 13. Christ says (Mt 22, 21), “Render therefore unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s.” Paul’s meaning is that when we become victims of sedition on the part of others we should

submit; just as we are not to inflict upon others privations, distresses, stripes or imprisonment, but rather to accept them at their hands. So Paul heads the list with patience; which does not produce sedition, but endures it.

It is a consolation in these times when we are charged with raising seditions, to reflect that it is the very nature and color of the Christian life that it be criticised as seditious when the fact is it patiently bears sedition directed against itself. Thus was it with Elijah, who was accused by King Ahab of troubling Israel and exciting turbulence. 1 Kings 18, 17-18. Then, when we are charged with guilt in this respect, let us remember that not only did the apostles have to hear the same accusation, but even Christ himself, with all his innocence, was so accused. More than that, he was falsely reviled upon the cross with a superscription charging sedition; in fact, he was even put to death as a Jewish king guilty of opposition to Cæsar and of enticing and inciting the people.

12. The remaining marks of the Christian life—patience, affliction, necessities, distresses, stripes, imprisonments, labor, watching, fasting, purity, etc., are easily interpreted; it is readily seen how they are instrumental in our service to God. God will not have indolent, idle gluttons, nor sleepy and impatient servants. Most adroitly does Paul score in particular our fine idle youths who draw interest from their money, have an easy life, and imagine their ton-sures, their long robes and their howling in the churches excuse them from labor. All men should labor and earn their bread, according to Paul. 2 Thes 3, 12. By labor, our text teaches, we serve God; more than that, our labor is testimony to the fact that we serve God.

“In knowledge.”

13. What is meant here? With Paul, knowledge signifies discretion, understanding, reason. He speaks of the Jews (Rom 10, 2) as having “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge”; that is, a zeal without reason, without understanding, without discretion. His message here, then, is: “We should conduct ourselves in Christian affairs with

becoming reason and moderation lest we give offense to the weak by a presumptuous use of Christian liberty. Rather we should, with discretion and understanding, adapt ourselves to that which promotes the neighbor's welfare. Likewise, when we labor, fast, or when we regulate our sexual relations, we are to exercise reason, lest the body should be injured by too much fasting, watching and toil, and also by needless abstention from sexual intercourse. Let everyone take heed to remain within bounds by using reason and discretion. The apostle counsels the married (1 Cor 7, 5) not to defraud each other too long, lest they be tempted. In all such matters, he would impose no measures and rules, no limits and laws, after the manner of the councils, the popes and the monks. He leaves it wholly to each individual's discretion to decide and to test for himself all questions of time and quantity bearing upon the restraints of his flesh.

"In longsuffering, in kindness."

14. The meaning of these phrases has been stated in many other places, particularly in connection with Romans 2 and Galations 5.

"By the Holy Spirit."

15. What are we to understand here? The words may have one of two meanings: First, the apostle may have reference to the Holy Spirit in person, who is God. Second, he may have reference to the spirit of individuals, or their spiritual condition. "Holy Spirit" may be intended to stand for "spirituality," Paul's meaning being: "Beware of the professedly spiritual, or of things glittering and purporting to be spiritual; beware of them who make great boast of the Spirit and nevertheless betray only a false, unclean, unholy spirit, productive of sects and discord. Abide ye in that true, holy spirituality proceeding from God's Holy Spirit, who imparts unity and harmony, determination and courage." As Paul expresses it elsewhere (Eph 4, 3), "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." They, then, who continue in one faith, one mind and disposition, give testimony by the reality and saintli-

ness of their spiritual life and by the presence of the Holy Spirit that they are servants of God. For true spirituality, or a holy walk in the Spirit, means to be in heart and mind at one with the Spirit, through faith.

“In love unfeigned, in the word of truth.”

16. As the apostle opposes the Holy Spirit to false sects and false prophets, so he opposes unfeigned love to indolent Christians who in true faith and unity of mind possess marks of true spirituality, but are nevertheless indolent, cold, in fact false as regards love.

Again, he opposes the “Word of Truth” to abusers of the Word of God, who misconstrue it and comment upon it according to their own fancy, and for their own honor and profit. While much that purports to be spiritual has not the Word as source and gives honor to the Spirit at the expense of the Word, the class under consideration profess to magnify the Word; they would be master interpreters of the Scriptures, confident that their explanations are correct and superior. In condemnation of this class, Peter says (1 Pet 4, 11), “If any man speaketh, speaking as it were oracles of God,” and not his own word. In other words, let him be assured he speaks the Word of God and not his own. God’s Word Paul here terms the “Word of truth”; that is, the true Word of God and not our own misconstrued, falsified word palmed off as God’s Word. In our idiom we would say “the real Word” where the Hebrew has “Word of truth,” or “true Word.”

“In the power of God.”

17. Peter speaks also of this power, in the verse before mentioned: “If any man ministereth, ministering as of the strength which God supplieth.” And Paul elsewhere declares (Col 1, 29): “Whereunto I labor also, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily”; and again (Rom 15, 18): “For I will not dare to speak of any things save those which Christ wrought through me, for the obedience of the Gentiles.” Christians should have the assurance that they are the kingdom of God, and that in whatever they do, especially in undertakings of a spirit-

ual character, which have the salvation of souls as aim, they beware of everything not absolutely known as true, so that the work be not theirs but God's.

In God's kingdom God alone is to speak, reign and act. Christ says (Mt 5, 16): "Even so let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven"—may glorify him as the worker, and not yourselves. Seductive spirits, however, come cavoring in their own power, throw the pictures out of the churches and establish rules of their own, without caring whether it is done in the power of God. The consequence is that their work is neither permanent nor fruitful.

THE ARMOR OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

"By the armor of righteousness."

18. This armor Paul more fully describes in Ephesians and in Thessalonians. Sufficient explanation of it has been given in the lesson for Advent. There is the "shield of faith," the "helmet of salvation," the shoes of "the preparation of the Gospel of peace," and so on. Paul includes them all under the term "armor of righteousness," and, in his epistle to the Ephesians, under the phrase "armor of God," to teach Christians to eschew and to forsake carnal, worldly weapons for these. He would have them know themselves a spiritual people, spiritually warring against the spiritual enemies enumerated here and pointed out on the right hand and on the left.

19. On the left hand he places dishonor and evil report, in that we appear to men as deceivers, unknown, in conflict with death, chastened, sorrowful, poor and needy. Scorn is hurled in our faces and the reputation accorded us is that of deceivers. The Christian must not only be unknown, friendless and a stranger, but men will also be ashamed of him—even his best friends—in consequence of the reproach and evil report under which he lies in the eyes of the great, the wealthy, the wise and the powerful of the world.

He must be as one dying—continually expecting death by reason of the hatred and envy directed against him, and the various persecutions he suffers. He must be beaten and

scourged; must at times feel the weight of the enmity and envy wherewith the world inflicts torment. He is like the sorrowful, for so ill does he fare in the world, he has reason to sorrow. He resembles the poor in that nothing is given him but injuries; he possesses nothing, for if he has not been deprived of all his possessions he daily expects that extremity.

Lest he despair of his hope in God and grow faint, he must be armed on the left hand against these enemies with a divine armor: with a firm faith, with the comfort of the divine Word, with hope, so that he may endure and exercise patience. Thereby he proves himself to be a true servant of God, inasmuch as false teachers and hypocrites, with all their pompous worship, are incapable of these things.

20. On the right he places honor and good report, inasmuch as we are after all true, well known, alive, defiant of death, full of joy, rich, possessing all things. The Christian will have always a few to honor and commend him; some there will be to give him a good report, to praise him as true and honest in doctrine. And there will be some who receive and acknowledge him, who are not ashamed of him. Life remains in spite of death oft faced, even in scourgings. He rejoices when things with him are at the worst, for his heart remains joyful in God, that joy finding expression in words, deeds and manner. Though poor in the goods of the world, he does not die of hunger, and he makes many spiritually rich through the Word. Even though he have no possessions at all, he suffers no lack but has in hand all things; for all creatures must serve the believer. As Christ promised (Mk 9, 23), "All things are possible to him that believeth." For himself, it is true, he possesses nothing, and gladly he endures his need; but for his neighbor's sake he can do all things, and all he has he is ready to place at the disposal of his neighbor whenever need requires. These blessings also give occasion for a powerful armor, for we must guard against pride and haughtiness.

21. Thus the Christian is quite untrammelled. His eyes are fixed upon God alone. Always choosing the safe middle

path he steers clear of danger on the right and on the left. He permits not the evil to overthrow him nor the good to exalt, but makes use of both to the honor of God and the benefit of his neighbor. This, Paul instructs us, should be the manner of our life now while the season of grace continues; nor must we fail to heed this! This is the true service of God, the service well pleasing to him; unto which may God help us. Amen.