

The Light Enlightens Our Lives

A Sermon on the Christian Life for the Season of Epiphany

In the season of Epiphany we look at how the Word of God works. Today is about the Christian life. We begin with Matthew 5:1-10 where we find the nine blessings of the Beatitudes. Let's look at the middle blessing in Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy."

Therefore those who are not merciful will not obtain mercy. This sets up a cause-and-effect situation. If you do this, then God will do that. That's a conditional clause in grammar. It's also a theological grammar that people find in the Bible. Perhaps not in the verse we just used in Matthew 5, but in Matthew 6 in what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

Included in Matthew 6 is the Lord's Prayer. Matthew 6:12 reads: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." That's conditional. It's spelled out immediately following in Matthew 6:14 and 15. Following the Lord's Prayer, it states: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you." If, then.

The same thing is found in Mark 11:25 and Luke 17:14. Most striking is what comes later in Matthew 18. The disciples come to Jesus and ask: "How many times shall we forgive?" Because the Rabbinic thinking of the time said not once but seven times. Then in Matthew 18:21 and 22 it says not seven times but 70 X 7! Immediately we compute that that is 490, but that doesn't mean that when we get to 490, we're off the hook. Of course it means forever.

The parable that follows in Matthew 18:23-35 is about the man who owed a debt. He was a steward who owed 10,000 talents. That's approximately \$20 million in today's money. He couldn't pay it. He went to the Master and asked if he could be forgiven. And the Master forgave him.

But then on his way home the steward met someone who owed him 100 denarii, about \$40.00. The fellow begged him to forgive him, but the steward said, "Not on your life!" As the parable goes on, it says the Master heard about this, and he said: "What in the world!" The steward was thrown in prison, and then comes the famous punch line in Matthew 18:35: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from the heart." That puts it very simply: "From the heart."

This goes well with other places in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:44 which says: "Love your enemies." It doesn't say: "Like them." It says: "Love them."

Then in Matthew 5:48: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." If we put it in our language today, it would be: "You, therefore, must be holy, as your

heavenly Father is holy." The same admonition is found in 1 Peter 1:16: "It is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" Not just a little bit holy, but holy as your Father in heaven is holy. That raises the stakes to the "nth" degree.

It's not something that we can brush off saying: "Those are just things that were said somewhere in a book." Salvation is at stake.

How can we live with this 70 X 7! There have been pastors who have spoken to abused wives and said: "You have to forgive him 70 X 7. That's what it means to be a Christian." Really? No! What do we do about this!

One thing we do is say to ourselves: "What it really means is: Do the best you can." But that isn't what it says.

The second thing we do is follow the French proverb: "When in difficulty, distinguish." People say: "I'll forgive, but I won't forget." That doesn't really do what forgiveness means.

Another thing people say is: "You just have to be human. You're human! You can't be anything else."

Most of all, we say we have to be sincere. If we're sincere, then whatever is, is what it is.

In our worship service we regularly use the Confession of Sin. Am I supposed to confess all my sins from this week? What if I forget them? What if I don't confess them seriously?

Then Luther points out: That's where you have the grammar wrong. That's not what it's about. There are two major ways in which this goes wrong among us. The grammar of what salvation is about.

One way we go wrong is to say: "Well, I can't do it so it doesn't matter. I'll just go on and live." That's the common way of going wrong because it's impossible. We can't, and we don't, and we know it if we are honest with ourselves.

Or we cling to our sincerity and forget that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We don't think of that. We just rely on our sincerity.

What's really bad is taking the grammar of salvation and turning it around to elevate what we do. The grammar of salvation says we are saved by what Christ does, not by what we do.

Luther speaks to this in his Large Catechism:

"We urge you, however, to confess and express your needs, not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wishes to say to you. The Word or absolution, I

say, is what you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude.”¹

Another way we get the grammar of salvation wrong is by throwing the law out the front door, and then sneaking it in the back door. That’s wrong because Moses is not the way to salvation, but Jesus is.

We bring Moses in the back door when we say: Well, yes, what Christ did is more important, but to make salvation work, we also have to do this and this.” We are tempted into thinking that there is a particular shape as to what the Christian life is about.

There are “evangelical counsels,” and “gospel imperatives,” which say: “Here’s the gospel then here’s what you have to do because this is the way it’s got to be.” The old “if, then” pattern. And there are all kinds of ideas about what we have to do to be Christian.

What is the grammar of salvation about? The grammar of salvation is not “if, then,” but “since, therefore.” Basic to salvation is that the Lord has done it. He has saved us. One Bible verse we often mention and many of us have memorized is 2 Cor 5:21. As Paul writes here: “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

It would be legitimate to substitute the word “holiness” for “righteousness” in 2 Cor 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the holiness of God.” It’s done. It’s not a kickstart, but Christ has given us his holiness and taken our sin.

There are two basic points that underlie all of this. First of all, we are totally sinful and totally righteous at the same time. And second, it is hidden from us. To have faith means to deal with God’s hiddenness. Hiddenness means God is doing it. And faith means God is doing it; he has done it, and that makes all the difference.

The New Testament has specific help for the Christian life. First of all, because the Lord has done it, it doesn’t depend on us. It’s certain because the certainty doesn’t depend “on anything we ask, think, say, or do.”² This means there’s a freedom to be what the Lord would have us be. What is that? The best way to describe this is that at the foot of the cross all people are equal. The Biblical image that is used by Paul in 1 Cor 8:11 and Romans 14:15 is: Remember that each one is “one for whom Christ died.” That makes all the difference.

The second is, as Paul discusses in 1 Cor 6:19-20: “You are not your own. You have been bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body.” That changes everything.

¹ Large Catechism, Confession, 22 (Tappert 459; Kolb/Wengert 478).

² Smalcald Articles, Part III/III, 36 (Tappert 309; Kolb/Wengert 318).

In the third place, with regard to the question: How does this work? In Romans 13:8-10 Paul takes up the command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." He lifts up individual commandments: Don't steal, don't covet, don't bear false witness, and says they are all summed up in "Love your neighbor as yourself." And then comes the key to it all in Romans 13:10: "Love does no harm to the neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Hippocrates). Love means minimizing harm to the neighbor. We have this task as we deal with life, as we deliberate together about how to minimize harm.

We can't claim or be sure that what we are doing is what the Lord wants. We can't just say: God and I are doing this together. We use the best thinking we can, and we live by forgiveness. He can take the wrong notes we play and rewrite the music.

Finally, we let God be God. He is the One who runs this world and the next. As Luther writes in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: The Holy Spirit is the one who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies." He's the one who does it. Therefore we can be certain, free, and thankful. We are then free to live for others as we sort out how what it means not to do harm to our neighbor. As Luther concludes:

"In this Christian church day after day
He fully forgives my sins
And the sins of all believers.
On the last day he will raise me and all
the dead
And give me and all believers in Christ
eternal life.
This is most certainly true."

Amen