

Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity;

Matthew 9:1-8

A truly wonderful sermon on the forgiveness of sins, that is, the righteousness which is through faith in Christ.

Matthew 9:1-8

And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.

1. The theme of this Gospel is the great and important article of faith, called "the forgiveness of sins", which, when rightly understood, makes an honest Christian, and gives eternal life. Therefore it is necessary in the Christian Church to teach this article diligently and unceasingly, so that we may learn to understand it clearly and distinctly. For this is the one great and difficult art of a Christian, where he will have enough to learn as long as he lives, so that he need not look for anything new, higher or better.

2. But that we may rightly understand this, we must thoroughly know how to distinguish two powers or kinds of piety. One here upon earth, which God has also ordained and has included under the second table of the ten commandments. This is called the righteousness of the world or of man, and serves to the end that we may live together on earth and enjoy the gifts God has given us. For it is his wish that his present life be kept under proper restraint and passed in peace, quietude and harmony, each one attending to his own affairs and not interfering with the business, property or person of another. For this reason God has also added a special blessing, Lev. 18, 5, "Which if a man do, he shall live in them", that is, whosoever upon earth is honest in the sight of all men shall enjoy life; it shall be well with him, and he shall live long.

3. But if on the other hand man is unwilling to do this, he has ordained that the sword, the gallows, the rack, fire, water, and the like be used, with which to restrain and check those

who will not be pious. Where such punishment is not administered and the whole country becomes so utterly bad and perverted, that the officers of the law can no longer restrain, God sends pestilence, famine, war, or other terrible plagues, in order to subvert the land, and destroy the wicked, as has happened to the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, and others. From this we may learn his will, namely, that such piety be exercised and maintained; and know that he will provide what is necessary; but if such piety is not practiced he will in turn take away and destroy everything.

4. This is in short the sense and the whole substance of this piety on earth. But it is further necessary to urge it and to admonish people that every man diligently, zealously and voluntarily exercise himself in it, and that he be not driven to it by force and punishment. This admonition consists in setting forth God's commandments and in applying them to every station of life on earth, as God has ordered and highly honored; we should find pleasure in them and heartily do what is required in the different spheres of life. When God says, "Honor thy father and thy mother," every child, man-servant, maid-servant, citizen, and the like, should receive the Word with joy, have no greater treasure on earth, and not imagine if he do this he is already halfway or altogether in paradise. And this should be solely done, that every heart may be assured without a doubt and say: Now I know, that such work, life, or position is right and proper and is assuredly well pleasing to God; for I have his Word and command as a sure witness, which never deceives nor fails me.

5. For do not let this be the least grace upon earth, when you have come to this decision in your heart and your conscience rests upon it. We owe this assurance to the blessed Gospel alone, in which we should delight and which we must reverence, even if we receive no other benefit or use from it than this, that it quiets our conscience and positively teaches us how to live and in what relation we stand to God. In what error and blindness we were aforesaid, when not even a spark of such teaching enlightened us and we allowed ourselves to be led in the name of the devil by the whims of every lying preacher; we tried all kinds of works, ran hither and thither, expended and wasted our energies, money and property; here we established masses and altars, there cloisters and brotherhoods, and every one was groping for the way in which he might serve God; yet no one found it, but all remained in darkness. For there was no God who might say: This is pleasing to me, this I have commanded, etc. Yes, our blind guides did nothing less than lose sight of God's word, separated it from good works, and instead of these set up other works everywhere; in addition to this they discarded and despised the positions in life, which God had appointed, as though he knew no better, nor even as well as we, how to manage his affairs.

6. Therefore we must constantly take heed to inculcate this Word of God, which does not burden us with any special, great and difficult works, but refers us to the condition in which we live, that we look for nothing else, but with a cheerful heart remain satisfied in it, and be assured that by such work more is accomplished than if one had established all the cloisters and kept all the orders, although it be the most insignificant domestic work. For hitherto we have been woefully deceived by the fine lustre and pomp of works, hoods, bald pates, coarse apparel, by fasts, wakes, pious looks, playing the devotee, and going barefoot. Our foolishness consists in laying too much stress upon the show of works and when these do not

glitter as something extraordinary we regard them as of no value; and poor fools that we are, we do not see that God has attached and bound this precious treasure, namely his Word, to such common works as filial obedience, external, domestic, or civil affairs, so as to include them in his order and command, which he wishes us to accept, the same as though he himself had appeared from heaven. What would you do if Christ himself with all the angels were visibly to descend, and command you in your home to sweep your house and wash the pans and kettles? How happy you would feel, and would not know how to act for joy, not for the work's sake, but that you knew that thereby you were serving him, who is greater than heaven and earth.

7. If we would only consider this, and by the power of the Word look beyond us, and think that it is not man, but God in heaven who wishes and commands these things, we would run full speed, and in a most faithful and diligent manner rather do these common, insignificant works, as they are regarded, than any others. There is no other reason why this is not done than the simple fact that the works are separated from the Word, and God's command is not regarded nor respected; we move along in a blind, drowsy manner, and think the doing of the works is all sufficient. Because we regard these works as insignificant, we stare and look around for others, become indolent and fretful, do nothing in love, faithfulness and obedience, have no scruples on account of our negligence, are faithless to our fellowmen, injure or vex them, and thus heap upon ourselves all manner of misery, wrath, and misfortune.

8. This then is one part of our discourse, that this external righteousness be urged both in admonitions and in threatening, and not be considered as of no importance. For whosoever despises it, despises God and his Word.

9. Therefore let every man look to himself what he is or what he has to do, and what God demands of him, whether it be to rule, to command and order, or on the contrary to obey, serve and labor, that he may attend to the duties of his office with all faithfulness for God's sake. Let him be assured that God has more respect for such faithfulness than for all the work and piety of the monks, who never yet have attained to this outward righteousness; nor are they able to extol all their works and doings as heartily as a child or servant girl performing their duties according to God's command. Oh, what a blessed world we would have, if people believed this, and every man remained at his post, always keeping in mind God's will and command. Then there would shower from heaven all kinds of blessings and gifts instead of the many vexations and heart-aches, which we now have, are looking for, and deserve.

10. Above this external piety there is another, which does not belong to this temporal life on earth but which avails only before God and which leads us to the life beyond and keeps us in it. The former piety consists in works, which this present life requires to be done among men, whether they be our superiors or inferiors, our neighbors, or our kindred. It has its reward here upon earth, also ends with this life, and they who do not practice it shorten their days. But this latter piety moves and soars far above everything that is upon earth, and has nothing to do with works. For how can it have works, since all that this body can perform and that is called works, is already included in the former piety. This piety is now called the

grace of God, or the forgiveness of sins, of which Christ speaks in this and other gospels, and which is not an earthly but heavenly righteousness; it does not come of our work and ability but is the work and gift of God. For that human piety may well shield us against punishment and the hangman, and permit us to enjoy temporal gifts; but it cannot attain for us God's grace and the forgiveness of sin. Therefore, even though we may have this external piety, we must nevertheless have a much higher one, which alone avails before God, frees us from sin and an evil conscience, and leads us out of death into eternal life.

11. This is, furthermore, the only part or article and doctrine, by believing which we become and are called Christians, and which separates and divorces us from all other saints on earth; for they all have a different foundation and nature of their saintliness, peculiar exercises, and rigorous life. It separates us also from the works of those holding positions and offices approved by the Word of God, which are indeed much higher and better than all the self-chosen ecclesiasticism of the monks. These also constitute a holy calling, so that they are called pious and deserve praise of all men because they do their duty. But all this makes no one a Christian. He alone is a Christian who receives this article in faith, and is assured that he is in the kingdom of grace, in which Christ protects him, and daily forgives him his sins. But he who looks for something else or wishes to deal otherwise with God, must know that he is no Christian, but is rejected and condemned by God.

12. For this reason the greatest skill and intelligence is needed to grasp and understand this righteousness, and in our hearts and before God rightly to distinguish it from the above mentioned outward righteousness. For this is, as has been said, the skill and the wisdom of the Christian, but it is so high and great that even all the beloved Apostles could not speak enough of it; and yet it meets the painful misfortune that no art is mastered as soon as this. There is no greater theme for a preacher than the grace of God and the forgiveness of sin, yet we are such wicked people, that, when we have once heard or read it, we think we know it, are immediately masters and doctors, keep looking for something greater, as though we had done everything, and thus we made new factions and division.

13. I have now been teaching and studying this subject with all diligence for many years (more than any one of those who imagine they know it all), in preaching, writing and reading, yet I cannot boast of having mastered it and am glad that I still remain a pupil with those who are just beginning to learn. For this reason I must admonish and warn all such as want to be Christians, both teachers and pupils, that they guard themselves against such shameful delusion and surfeit, and understand that this subject is most difficult and the greatest art that can be found upon earth; so that even Paul had to confess and say (2 Cor. 9, 15) that it is an unspeakable gift, that is, one which cannot be described among men with words so that they may regard it as highly and dearly as it really is in itself.

14. The reason for this is, that man's understanding cannot get beyond this external piety of works, and cannot comprehend the righteousness of faith; but, the greater and more skillful this understanding is, the more it confines itself to works and rests upon them. It is not possible for man in times of temptation and distress, when his conscience smites him, to cease from groping around for works on which to stand and rest. Then we seek and enumerate the many good deeds, which we would like to do, or have done, and because we

find none, the heart begins to doubt and despair. This weakness adheres so firmly to our nature, that even those who have faith and recognize the grace of God, or the forgiveness of sins, cannot overcome it with all their efforts and exertions, and must daily contend against it. In short it is entirely beyond human knowledge and understanding, ability and power, to ascend above this earthly righteousness, and to transfer oneself into this article of faith; and although one hears much about it and is conversant with it, there continues nevertheless the old delusion and inborn corruption which would bring its own works before God and make them the foundation of salvation. Such is the case, I say, with those who are Christians and fight against this work-righteousness; others, critics and inexperienced souls are even lost in it.

15. Therefore this doctrine, that our piety before God consists entirely in the forgiveness of sins, must be rightly comprehended and firmly maintained. We must therefore get beyond ourselves and ascend higher than our reason, which keeps us in conflict with ourselves and which reminds us both of sin and good works; and we must soar so high as to see neither sin nor good works, but be rooted and grounded in this article and see and know nothing besides. Therefore let grace or forgiveness be pitted not only against sin, but also against good works, and let all human righteousness and holiness be excluded. Thus there are in man two conflicting powers: Externally in this life he is to be pious, do good works, and the like, But if he aims beyond this life and wishes to deal with God, he must know that here neither his sin nor his piety avails anything. And though he may feel his sins which disturb his conscience, and although the law demands good works, he will not listen nor give heed to them, but will boldly reply; If I have sin, Christ has forgiveness; yea, I am seated on a throne to which sin cannot attain.

16. Therefore we are to regard the kingdom of Christ as a large, beautiful arch or vault which is everywhere over us, and covers and protects us against the wrath of God; yea, as a great, extended firmament which pure grace and forgiveness illuminate and so fill the world and all things, that all sin will hardly appear as a spark in comparison with the great, extended sea of light; and although sin may oppress, it cannot injure, but must disappear and vanish before grace. They who understand this, may well be called masters, but we will all have to humble ourselves and not be ashamed to keep on learning this lesson as long as we live.

17. For wherever our nature succeeds in finding sin, it tries to make an unbearable burden of it. Satan fans the spark and blows up a great fire which fills heaven and earth. Here the leaf must be turned and we must firmly conclude: If the sin were ever so great or burdensome, this article of faith is nevertheless much higher, wider and greater, which has been recommended and established not by man's wisdom, but by him who has comprehended heaven and earth and holds them in the hollow of his hand. Is. 40, 12. My sin and piety must remain here on earth as far as they concern my life and conduct. But in heaven above I have another treasure, greater than either of these; there Christ is seated and holds me in his arms, covers me with his wings and overshadows me with his grace.

18. You may say: How is this, since I daily feel sin and my conscience condemns me and threatens me with God's wrath? I answer: For this reason, I say, one must understand that the

righteousness of a Christian is nothing that can be named or imagined but the forgiveness of sin, that is, it is a kingdom of power which deals only with sin and with such abundant grace as takes away all wrath. It is called the forgiveness of sin for the reason that we are truly sinners before God; yes, everything in us is sin, even though we may have all human righteousness. For where God speaks of sin, there must be real and great sin; so also forgiveness is no jest, but real earnestness. When you, therefore, consider this article you have both. Sin takes away all your holiness, no matter how pious you are on earth; again, forgiveness takes away all sin and wrath. Therefore your sin cannot cast you into hell, nor can your piety elevate you into heaven.

19. Therefore, when the devil disturbs your conscience, and tries to bring despair to your heart by saying: "Have you not learned that one must be pious?" then answer courageously and say: Yes, you are right; I am a sinner, that I have known before; for this article, called the forgiveness of sins, has taught me this long ago. I am to be pious and do what I can before the world; but before God I am willing to be a sinner, and to be called nothing else, that this article may remain true, else there would not be forgiveness or grace; but it must needs be called a crown of righteousness and of merits. Therefore, although I feel nothing but many and great sins, yet they are no longer sins; for I have for them a precious panacea and drug which takes away the power and poison of sin and wholly destroys it. It is this word, "Forgiveness," before which sin disappears like stubbles before the fire. Without it no work, suffering, or martyrdom avails against the smallest sin. For without forgiveness sin is and remains pure sin, which condemns us.

20. Therefore only confess this article heartily and boldly and say: Before the world I may be pious and do everything that is required, but before God it is only sin according to this article. Therefore I am a sinner, but a sinner who now has forgiveness and who sits at the throne where grace rules supreme, Ps. 116. If this were not so I would be a sinner like Judas, who saw only his sin, but no forgiveness. But Christians, no matter how much sin they feel in themselves, in that word forgiveness see much more abundant grace presented to them, and poured out over them.

21. Thus learn then to magnify this article and spread it as far as Christ reaches and rules, that you may elevate it far above everything in heaven and on earth. For as the Word soars over all this, so must also faith, which comprehends the Word and keeps the heart steadfast in it, overcome sin, conscience, death and the devil.

22. Consider now what kind of a person a Christian is, who lords it over death and the devil, and before whom all sin is as a withered leaf. Now examine yourself and see how far you have learned this lesson, and whether it is such an insignificant and easy matter as some inexperienced souls think. For if you have learned and believed it, all misfortune, death, and the devil will be as nothing. But since you are still so vexed with sin, and since you are still frightened and in despair on account of death, hell and God's judgment, humble yourself, give honor to the Word and confess that you have never yet understood this matter. In short let every man examine his own heart, and he will find a false Christian who imagines that he knows all about this subject before he has learned the first principles of it. The words are soon heard, read and repeated, but to carry out the principle in practice and in

character, so that it may live within us, and our conscience may be founded upon it and rest in it, is not in the art of man. Therefore I say and admonish, that those who wish to be Christians may always keep it in mind, assimilate it, practice it, and chastise themselves with it, that we may at least have a taste of it, and as James says, 1, 18, be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. For we shall never advance so far in this life as to come to a perfect understanding of it; nor did even the blessed Apostles full of the Spirit and of faith, advance so far.

23. Thus far I have explained the first part, what Christian righteousness is and in what it consists. But if you ask further, whence it comes, or how it has been brought about or gained, I answer: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come from heaven and has been made man, has suffered and died for our sins. This is the cause, the means, and the treasure, through which we obtain the forgiveness of sin and for the sake of which the grace of God is bestowed upon us; for such a treasure does not come to us without means or merit. But since all of us are born in sin and are the enemies of God, we have deserved only eternal wrath and punishment. All that we are and have is condemned, and there is no help or way out of it. For sin is so grievous that no creature can quench it, the wrath so great that no man can appease and conciliate it. Therefore another man must take our place, namely Jesus Christ, God and man, and through his suffering and death make satisfaction for our sins and pay for them. This is the price that has been set, and has been expended for us, by which sin has been quenched and the wrath of God appeased, the Father has been reconciled and made our friend.

24. Christians alone know this and believe it, and are in this respect different from those of every other faith and worship on earth. For the Jews, Turks, false Christians, and those who would be righteous by works, also boast that God is merciful; and there is no man on earth but knows something of the grace of God, and yet all of them fail to obtain it, or in other words, they do not have the treasure in which it lies and from which it flows. They continue in their blindness and imagine they can acquire it by their works, rigid life, and their own holiness, with which they only make the wrath and displeasure of God the more grievous.

25. Therefore it is necessary that we rightly learn to know this treasure, and seek forgiveness where it may be found; that is, that we thoroughly learn to know, comprehend, and keep the Lord Jesus Christ. For it is ordained that no one shall come into God's presence, find grace, nor obtain forgiveness of the least sin except through Christ. Because you are a sinner, and will always remain one, your conscience is ever present, condemns and threatens you with God's wrath and punishment, so that you cannot see the grace of God. With reference to the forgiveness of sins let me say, that you will not find anything in your heart with which you can pay them off, nor raise any funds for which God might recognize you and cancel the debt in the ledger. But if you seize Christ as the one who has become your substitute, who has taken your sin upon himself, and who has given himself with all his merit and worthiness for you, no sin can avail anything against you. If I am a sinner, he is holy, and is Lord over sin, death, satan and hell, so that no sin can harm me, because he has been given me as my righteousness and salvation.

26. Therefore we have, indeed, pure grace and forgiveness of all sins, but nowhere except in and through Christ alone, and in him only it must be sought and obtained. Therefore whoever will come before God with any kind of work, that God shall recognize and regard as meritorious for obtaining grace, will be disappointed and undeceived, yea, instead of grace he will heap wrath upon himself. Thus you see that all other ways and means are condemned as the doctrines of devils; by which men are led and directed to their own works, or to the holiness and merits of others, as for example, of the saints who have led ascetic lives and followed the rules of their orders, and have suffered and expiated a great deal; or as those have done who have comforted people in the throes of death and have admonished them to suffer death willingly for their sins. Whoever dares to offer anything else for sin or to atone for it himself does nothing else than deny the Lord Jesus Christ, yea, disgrace and slander him, as if the blood of Christ were of no more consequence than our repentance and satisfaction, or as if his blood were not sufficient to take away all the sins of the earth.

27. Therefore, would you be freed from your sins, cease to seek works and satisfaction, and to bring them before God; but simply creep under the wings and into the bosom of Christ, as the one who has taken away your sins, and has laid them upon himself. Thus you need not chastise yourself with them, nor have anything to do with them! For he is the Lamb of God, says John 1, 29, which taketh away the sins of the world; and Peter says, Acts 4, 12, There is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved. The reason we are Christians is because we have Christ with all His merit and worthiness, not because of our efforts and works, which indeed make a St. Carthusius, a St. Francis, or an Augustinian monk, an obedient servant and extremist as they are called; but such works can never make a Christian. Behold, this is the second part which belongs to the sermon on this article.

28. The third thought is how and by what means we may appropriate such righteousness, so that we may receive the treasure acquired by Christ. Here also we need to give heed that we take the right way, and not make the mistake, which certain heretics have made in times past, and many erroneous minds still set forth, who think that God ought to do something special with them. These imagine that God will deal separately with each one by some special internal light and mysterious revelation, and give him the Holy Ghost, as though there was no need of the written Word or the external sermon. Consequently we are to know that God has ordained that no one shall come to the knowledge of Christ, nor obtain the forgiveness acquired by him, nor receive the Holy Ghost, without the use of external and public means; but God has embraced this treasure in the oral word or public ministry, and will not perform his work in a corner or mysteriously in the heart, but will have it heralded and distributed openly among the people, even as Christ commands, Mark 16, 15: Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, etc.

29. He does this in order that we may know how and where to seek and expect his grace, so that in all Christendom there may be the same custom and order, and not every man follow his own mind and act according to his own notions, and so deceive himself and others, which would certainly happen. As we cannot look into the heart of any man, each one might boast of having the Holy Ghost and set forth his own thoughts as divine revelation which

God had inspired and taught him in a special manner; as a result, no one would know whom or what to believe.

30. Therefore this part also, namely the external word or preaching, belongs to Christianity as a channel or means through which we attain unto the forgiveness of sins, or the righteousness of Christ, with which Christ reveals and offers us his grace or lays it into our bosom, and without which no one would ever come to a knowledge of this treasure. For whence should any man know, or in what man's heart would it ever come, that Christ, the Son of God, came from heaven for our sake, died for us, and rose from the dead, acquired the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and offers the same to us, without publicly having it announced and preached? And although he acquired this treasure for us through his suffering and death, no one could obtain or receive it, if Christ did not have it offered, presented, and applied. And all that he had done and suffered would be to no purpose, but would be like some great and precious treasure buried in the earth, which no one could find or make use of.

31. Therefore I have always taught that the oral word must precede every thing else, must be comprehended with the ears, if the Holy Ghost is to enter the heart, who through the Word enlightens it and works faith. Consequently faith does not come except through the hearing and oral preaching of the Gospel, in which it has its beginning, growth and strength. For this reason the Word must not be despised, but held in honor. We must familiarize and acquaint ourselves with it, and constantly practice it, so that it never ceases to bear fruit; for it can never be understood and learned too well. Let every man beware of the shameless fellows who have no more respect for the Word than if it were unnecessary for faith; or of those who think they know it all, become tired of it, eventually fall from it, and retain nothing of faith or of Christ.

32. Behold, here you have all that belongs to this article of the righteousness of Christ. It consists in the forgiveness of sins, offered to us through Christ, and received by faith in and through the Word, purely and simply without any works on our part. Yet I do not mean that Christians should not and must not do good works, but that they are not to be mingled and entwined in the doctrine of faith, and decorated with the shameless delusion that they avail before God as righteousness, whereby both the doctrine of works and of faith are besmirched and destroyed. For everything possible must be done to keep this article pure, unadulterated and separate from all our own doings. But after we have this righteousness by faith, works are to follow and continue here on earth, so that there may be civil righteousness, and that both be maintained, each in its proper place, but separate in their nature and efficacy - the former before God in faith over and above all works, the latter works in love to our neighbor, as we said plainly enough above and always taught.

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