

True Piety—the Law, Faith and Love

Sunday after Easter—Second Sermon

Sermon on John 20:19-31

Author: Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546) Year: 1522

Text

¹⁹When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. ²⁰And when he had said this, he showed unto them his hands and his side. The disciples therefore were glad, when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus therefore said to them again, Peace be unto you: as the Father hath sent me, even so send I you. ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit: ²³whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. ²⁴But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe. ²⁶And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Jesus cometh, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. ²⁷Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and see my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and put it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. ²⁸Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. ²⁹Jesus saith unto him, Because thou hast seen me, [b]thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. ³⁰Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: ³¹but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name.

Sermon

Of True Godliness; Of the Law and Faith

¹ In today's Gospel is presented to us, what the life of a Christian is to be and that it consists of two parts: first, that the Lord shows Thomas his hands and feet; secondly, that he is sent as Christ is sent. This is nothing else than faith and love, the two thoughts that are preached to us in all the Gospel texts.

² Formerly you heard, and alas! it is preached in all the world, that if anyone desires to become righteous, he must begin with human laws. This was done under the reign of the pope, and nearly all the very best preachers preached nothing else than how one is to be outwardly pious, and about good works which glitter before the world. But this is still far from the true righteousness that avails before God.

³ There is another way to begin to become righteous, which commences by teaching us the laws of God, from which we learn to know ourselves, what we are, and how impossible it is for us to fulfill the divine commandments. The law speaks thus: Thou shalt have one God, worship him alone, trust in him alone, seek help and comfort from him alone. Exodus 20. The heart hears this and yet it cannot do it. Why then does the law command such an impossible thing? In order, as I have said, to show us our inability, and that we may learn to know ourselves and to see ourselves as we are, even as one sees himself in a mirror. When now the conscience, thus smitten by God's law, begins to quake and finds that it does not keep God's commandment, then the law does its proper work; for the true mission of the law is only to terrify the conscience.

⁴ But there are two classes of men who fulfill the law, or who imagine they fulfill it. The first are those who, when they have heard it, begin with outward works; they desire to perform and fulfill it by works. How do they proceed? They say: God has commanded thou shalt have one God; I surely will worship no other God; I will serve him and no idol, and will have no heathen idolatrous image in my house or in my church; why should I do this? Such persons make a show with their glittering, fabricated service of God, like the clergy in our day, and they think they keep this law, when they bend their knees and are able to sing and prate much about God. By this show the poor laity also are deceived; they follow after and also desire to obey the law by their works. But the blind guides the blind and both fall into a pit, Luke 6:39. This is the first class, who take hold and imagine they will keep the law, and yet they do not.

⁵ The other class are those who know themselves by the law and study what it seeks and requires. For instance, when the law speaks: "*Thou shalt have one God, and worship and honor him alone,*" this same heart meditates: What does this mean? Shalt thou bend the knees? Or what is it to have one God? It surely is something else than a bodily, outward reverence; and finally it perceives that is a very different thing than is generally supposed; that it is nothing but having trust and hope in God, that he will help and assist in all anxiety and distress, in every temptation and adversity, that he will save him from sin, from death, from hell and from the devil, without whose help and salvation he alone can do nothing. And this is the meaning of having one God. A heart, so thoroughly humble, desires to have God, namely, a heart that has become quite terrified and shaken by this commandment, and in its anxiety and trouble flees to God alone.

⁶ This now the hypocrites and work-saints, who lead a fine life before the world, are not able to do; for their confidence is based alone upon their own righteousness and outward piety. Therefore, when God attacks them with the law and causes the poor people to see that they have not kept the law, aye, not the least of it, and when overwhelmed by anxiety and distress, and an evil conscience, and they perceive that external works will not suffice and that keeping the commandments of God is a very different thing from what they thought; then they rush ahead and seek ever more and more, and other and still other works, and fancy that they will thereby quiet their conscience; but they greatly miss the right way. Hence it comes to pass that one wishes to do it by rosaries, another by fasting; this one by prayer and that one by torturing his body; one runs to St. James, another to Rome, this man to Jerusalem, that to Aix; here one becomes a monk, another a nun, and they seek their end in so many ways that they can scarcely be enumerated.

⁷ Why do they do all this? Because they wish to save themselves, to rescue and help themselves. The consequence of this is great blasphemy of God, for they also boast mightily of these works, and vaunt and say: I have been in an order so long, I have prayed so many rosaries, have fasted so much, have done this and that; God will give me heaven as a reward. This then means to have an idol. This also is

the meaning of Isaiah, when he says: "*They worship the work of their own hands,*" Isaiah 2:8. He is not speaking of stone and wood, but of the external works, which have a show of goodness and beauty before men. These hypocrites are ingenious enough to give the chaff to God and to keep the wheat for themselves. This then is true idolatry, as St. Paul writes to the Romans: "*Thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou rob temples?*" Romans 2:22. This is spiritual robbery.

⁸ Therefore you will find that there is nothing good in any man of himself. But you have this distinction, that the upright, in whom the law has exercised its work, when they feel their sickness and weakness, say: God will help me; I trust in him; I build upon him; he is my rock and hope. But the others, as hypocrites and work-saints, when trial, distress and anxiety are at hand, lament and say: Oh, whither shall I go? They must at last despair of God, of themselves and of their works, even if they have ever so many of them.

⁹ Such in the first place are these false and unrighteous pupils of the law, who presume to fulfill it by their works. For they have an appearance and glitter outwardly, but in their hearts they have nothing but filth and uncleanness. Therefore they also merit nothing before God, who regards not external works that are done without any heart in them.

¹⁰ In the second place they are the true and real pupils, who keep the law, who know and are conscious that they do evil, and make naught of themselves, surrender themselves, count all their works unclean in the eyes of God, and despair of themselves and all their own works. They who do this, shall have no trouble, except that they must not deceive themselves with vain fruitless thoughts and defer this matter until death; for if anyone persistently postpones this until death, he will have a sad future.

¹¹ But we must give heed that we do not despair, even if we still feel sinful inclinations and are not as pure as we would like to be. You will not entirely sweep out of your heart all this rubbish, because we are still flesh and blood. This much can surely be done: outward wicked deeds can be prevented and carnal, shameful words and works avoided, although it is attained with difficulty. But it will never come to pass here that you are free from lust and evil inclination. St. Jerome undertook to root such inclinations out of his heart by prayer, fasting, work and torture of the body; but he found out what he accomplished; it was of no avail, the concupiscence remained. Works and words can be restrained, but lust and inclinations no one can root out of himself.

¹² In short, if you desire to attain the true righteousness that avails before God, you must despair altogether of yourself and trust in God alone; you must surrender yourself entirely to Christ and accept him, so that all that he has is yours, and all that is yours, becomes his. For in this way you begin to burn with divine love and become quite another man, completely born anew, and all that is in you is converted. Then you will have as much delight in chastity as before you had pleasure in unchastity, and so forth with all lusts and inclinations.

¹³ This now is the first work of God, that we know ourselves, how condemned, miserable, weak and sickly we are. It is then good and God's will, that a man desponds and despairs of himself, when he hears: This shalt thou do and that shalt thou do. For everybody must feel and experience in himself, that he does not and cannot do it. The law is neither able nor is it designed to give you this power of obeying it; but it effects what St. Paul says: "*The law worketh wrath,*" Romans 4:15, that is, nature rages against the law, and wishes the law did not exist.

¹⁴ Therefore they who presume to satisfy the law by outward deeds, become hypocrites; but in the others it works wrath only, and causes sins to increase, as St. Paul says in another place: *“The power of sin is the law.”* 1 Corinthians 15:56. For the law does not take sin away, aye, it multiplies sin, and causes me to feel my sin. So he says again to the Corinthians: *“The letter killeth,”* 2 Corinthians 3:6, that is, the law works death in you; in other words, it reduces you to nothing; *“but the Spirit giveth life.”* For when he comes through the Gospel, the law is already fulfilled, as we shall hear.

¹⁵ Therefore the world errs, when it tries to make men righteous through laws; only pretenders and hypocrites result from such efforts. But reverse this and say as St. Paul says: The law produces sin. For the law does not help me the least, except that it teaches me to know myself; there I find nothing but sin; how then should it take sin away? We will now see how this thought is set forth in this Gospel. The text says:

“When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were shut where disciples were for fear of the Jews.”

¹⁶ What do the disciples fear? They fear death; aye they were in the very midst of death. Whence came their fear of death? From sin, for if they had not sinned, they would not have feared. Nor could death have injured them; for the sting of death, by means of which it kills, is sin, 1 Corinthians 15:56. But they, like us all, had not yet a true knowledge of God. For if they had esteemed God as God, they would have been without fear and in security; as David says: *“Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.”* Psalm 139:7-10. And as he says in another place: *“In peace will I both lay me down and sleep; for thou, Jehovah, alone makest me dwell in safety,”* Psalm 4:8. It is easy to die, if I believe in God; for then I fear no death. But whoever does not believe in God, must fear death, and can never have a joyful and secure conscience.

¹⁷ Now God drives us to this by holding the law before us, in order that through the law we may come to a knowledge of ourselves. For where there is not this knowledge, one can never be saved. He that is well needs no physician; but if a man is sick and desires to become well, he must know that he is weak and sick, otherwise he cannot be helped. But if one is a fool and refuses to take the remedy that will restore him to health he must certainly die and perish. But our papists have closed our eyes, so that we were not compelled, and not able, to know ourselves, and they failed to preach the true power of the law. For where the law is not properly preached, there can be no self-knowledge.

¹⁸ David had such knowledge, when he said: *“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness; according to the multitude of thy mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, that thou mayest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”* Psalm 51:1ff. Just as if David wished to say: Behold, I am so formed of flesh and blood, which of itself is sin, that I cannot but sin. For although you restrain your hands and feet or tongue, that they sin not; the inclinations and lusts always remain, because flesh and blood are present, you may go whither you please, to Rome or to St. James.

¹⁹ If now an upright heart that comes to the point of knowing itself is met by the law, it verily will not begin and seek to help itself by works; but it confesses its sin and helplessness, its infirmity and sickness, and says: Lord God, I am a sinner, a transgressor of thy divine commandments: help thou, for I am lost. Now when a man is in such fear and cries out thus to God, God cannot refrain from helping him; as in this case Christ was not long absent from the disciples tormented by fear; but he is soon present, comforts them and says: *“Peace be unto you!”* Be of good courage; it is I; fear not. The same happens now. When we come to a knowledge of ourselves through the law and are now in deep fear, God arouses us and has the Gospel preached to us, by which he gives us a joyful and secure conscience.

²⁰ But what is the Gospel? It is this, that God has sent his Son into the world to save sinners, John 3:16, and to crush hell, overcome death, take away sin and satisfy the law. But what must you do? Nothing but accept this and look up to your Redeemer and firmly believe that he has done all this for your good and freely gives you all as your own, so that in the terrors of death, sin and hell you can confidently say and boldly depend upon it, and say: Although I do not fulfill the law, although sin is still present and I fear death and hell, nevertheless from the Gospel I know that Christ has bestowed upon me all his works. I am sure he will not lie, his promise he will surely fulfill. And as a sign of this I have received baptism. For he says to his apostles and disciples: *“Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned,”* Mark 16:15-16. Upon this I anchor my confidence. For I know that my Lord Christ has overcome death, sin, hell and the devil all for my good. For he was innocent, as Peter says: *“Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth.”* 1 Peter 2:22. Therefore sin and death were not able to slay him, hell could not hold him, and he has become their Lord, and has granted this to all who accept and believe it. All this is effected not by my works or merits; but by pure grace, goodness and mercy.

²¹ Now whoever does not appropriate this faith to himself, must perish; and whoever possesses this faith, shall be saved. For where Christ is, the Father will come and also the Holy Spirit. There will then be pure grace, no law; pure mercy, no sin; pure life, no death; pure heaven, no hell. There I will comfort myself with the works of Christ, as if I myself had done them. There I will no longer concern myself about cows or tonsures, St. James or Rome, rosaries or scapularies, praying or fasting, priests or monks.

²² Behold, how beautiful the confidence towards God that arises in us through Christ! You may be rich or poor, sick or well, yet you will always say: God is mine, I am willing to die; for this is acceptable to my Father, and death cannot harm me; it is swallowed up in victory, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:57, yet not through us, but *“Thanks be to God,”* says he, *“who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Therefore although we must die, we have no fear of death, for its power and might are broken by Christ, our Savior.

²³ So then you understand that the Gospel is nothing but preaching and glad tidings, how Christ entered into the throes of death for us, took upon himself all our sins and abolished them; not that it was needful for him to do it, but it was pleasing to the Father; and that he has bestowed all this upon us, in order that we might boldly stand upon it against sin, death, Satan and hell. Hence arises great, unspeakable joy, such as the disciples here experience. The text says: *“The disciples therefore were glad, when they saw the Lord”*—not a Lord, who inspired them with terror or burdened them with labor and toil, but who provided for them and watched over them like a father is the lord of his estate and cares for his own. Aye, then first they rejoiced most on his account, when he spake to them:

“Peace be unto you! It is I”, and when he had showed unto them his hands and feet, that is, his works, all which were to be theirs.

²⁴ In the same manner he still comes to us through the Gospel, offers us peace and bestows his works upon us: if we believe, we have them; if we believe not, we have them not. For the Lord’s hands and feet really signify nothing but his works, which he has done here upon earth for men. And the showing of his side is nothing but the showing of his heart, in order that we may see how kind, loving and fatherlike his mind is toward us. All this is set forth for us in the Gospel as certainly and clearly as it was revealed and shown to the disciples bodily in our text. And it is much better that it is done through the Gospel than if he now entered here by the door; for you would not know him, even if you saw him standing before you, even much less than the Jews recognized him.

²⁵ This is the true way to become righteous, not by human commandments, but by keeping the commandments of God. Now nobody can do this except by faith in Christ alone. From this flows love that is the fulfillment of the law, as St. Paul says in Romans 13:10. And this results not from the exercise of virtues and good works, as was taught hitherto, which produced only true martyrs of Satan and hypocrites; but faith makes righteous, holy, chaste, humble and so forth. For as Paul says to the Romans: *“The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as is written, But the righteous shall live by faith.”* Romans 1:16-17. As if St. Paul should say: Your works will not save you but the Gospel will, if you believe; your righteousness is nothing, but Christ’s righteousness avails before God; the Gospel speaks of this and no other writing does. Whoever now wishes to overcome death and blot out sins by his works, says that Christ has not died; as St. Paul says to the Galatians, *“If righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for naught.”* Galatians 2:21. And they who preach otherwise are wolves and seducers.

²⁶ This has been said of the first part of our Gospel, to show what is to be our attitude toward God, namely, we are to cling to him in faith; and it shows what true righteousness is that is availing before God and how it is attained, namely, by faith in Christ, who has redeemed us from the law, from death, sin, hell and the devil; and who has freely given us all this in order that we may rely upon it in defiance of the law, death, sin, hell and the devil. Now follows how we are to conduct ourselves toward our neighbor; this is also shown to us in the text, where the Lord speaks thus:

Of Love to your Neighbor

“As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”

²⁷ Why did God the Father send Christ? For no other purpose than to do the Father’s will, namely, to redeem the world. He was not sent to merit heaven by good works or to become righteous thereby. He did many good works, aye, his whole life was nothing else than a continual doing good. But for whom did he do it? For the people who stood in need of it, as we read here and there in the Evangelists; for all he did, he did for the purpose of serving us. *“As the Father hath sent me,”* he says here, *“even so send I you.”* My Father hath sent me to fulfill the law, take the sin of the world upon myself, slay Death and overcome hell and the devil; not for my own sake, for I am not in need of it; but all for your sakes and in your behalf, in order that I may serve you. So shall you also do.

²⁸ By faith you will accomplish all this. It will make you righteous before God and save you, and likewise also overcome death, sin, hell and the devil. But this faith you are to show in love, so that all

your works may be directed to this end; not that you are to seek to merit anything by them; for all in heaven and earth is yours beforehand; but that you serve your neighbor thereby. For if you do not give forth such proofs of faith, it is certain that your faith is not right. Not that good works are commanded us by this Word; for where faith in the heart is right, there is no need of much commanding good works to be done; they follow of themselves. But the works of love are only an evidence of the existence of faith.

²⁹ This also is the intent of St. Peter, when he admonishes us in 2 Peter 1:5, to give diligence to make our faith sure and to prove it by our good works. But good works are those we do to our neighbor in serving him, and the only one thing demanded of a Christian is to love. For by faith he is already righteous and saved; as St. Paul says in Romans 13:8: *“Owe no man anything, save to love one another: for he that loveth his neighbor hath fulfilled the law.”* Therefore Christ says to his disciples in John 13:34-35: *“A new commandment I give unto, you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”*

³⁰ In this way we must give proof of ourselves before the world, that everyone may see that we keep God’s commandment; and yet not that we would be saved or become righteous thereby. So then I obey the civil government for I know that Christ was obedient to the government, and yet he had no need to be; he did it only for our sakes. Therefore I will also do it for Christ’s sake and in behalf of my neighbor, and for the reason alone that I may prove my faith by my love; and so on through all commandments. In this manner the Apostles exhort us to good works in their writings; not that we become righteous and are saved by them, but only to prove our faith both to ourselves and others, and to make it sure. The Gospel continues:

“Receive ye the Holy Spirit: Whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”

³¹ This power is here given to all Christians, although some have appropriated it to themselves alone, like the pope, bishops, priests and monks have done: they declare publicly and arrogantly that this power was given to them alone and not to the laity. But Christ here speaks neither of priests nor of monks, but says: *“Receive ye the Holy Spirit,”* Whoever has the Holy Spirit, power is given to him, that is, to every one that is a Christian. But who is a Christian? He that believes. Whoever believes has the Holy Spirit. Therefore every Christian has the power, which the pope, bishops, priests and monks have in this case, to forgive sins or to retain them.

³² Do I hear then, that I can institute confession, baptize, preach and administer the Lord’s supper? No. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:40: *“Let all things be done decently and in order.”* If everybody wished to hear confession, baptize and administer the Lord’s supper, what order would there be? Likewise, if everybody wished to preach, who would hear? If we all preached at the same time, what a confused babble it would be, like the noise of frogs! Therefore the following order is to be observed: the congregation shall elect one, who is qualified, and he shall administer the Lord’s supper, preach, hear confession and baptize. True we all have this power; but no one shall presume to exercise it publicly, except the one who has been elected by the congregation to do so. But in private I may freely exercise it. For instance, if my neighbor comes and says: Friend, I am burdened in my conscience; speak the absolution to me; then I am free to do so, but I say it must be done privately. If I were to take my seat in the church, and another and all would hear confession, what order and harmony would there be? Take an illustration: If there are many heirs among the nobility, with the

consent of all the others they elect one, who alone administers the estate in behalf of the others; for if every one wished to rule the country and people, how would it be? Still they all alike have the power that he has who rules. So also is it with this power to forgive sins and to retain them.

³³ But this word, to forgive sins or to retain sins, concerns those who confess and receive more than those who are to impart the absolution. And thereby we serve our neighbor. For in all services the greatest is to release from sin, to deliver from the devil and hell. But how is this done? Through the Gospel, when I preach it to a person and tell him to appropriate the words of Christ and to believe firmly that Christ's righteousness is his own and his sins are Christ's. This I say, is the greatest service I can render to my neighbor.

³⁴ Accursed be the life, where one lives only for himself and not for his neighbor; and on the contrary, blessed be the life, in which one lives not for himself but for his neighbor and serves him by teaching, by rebuke, by help and by whatever manner and means. If my neighbor errs, I am to correct him; if he cannot immediately follow me, then I am to bear patiently with him; as Christ did with Judas, who had the purse with the money and went wrong and stole from it. Christ knew this very well; yet he had patience with him, admonished him diligently, although it did no good, until he disgraced himself.

³⁵ So we are to give heed to do everything in behalf of our neighbor, and ever to be mindful, that Christ has done this and that for me; why should I not also for his sake freely do all for my neighbor? And see to it that all the works you do, are directed not to God, but to your neighbor. Whoever is a ruler, a prince, a mayor, a judge, let him not think that he is a ruler to gain heaven thereby or to seek his own advantage; but to serve the public. And so with other works, I assume to do for the good of my neighbor. For example if I take a wife, I make myself a captive; why do I do this? In order that I may not do harm to my neighbor's wife and daughters, and thus may bring my body into subjection; and so forth with all other work:s.

³⁶ Thus then you have finely portrayed in this Gospel, as in almost all the Gospel lessons these two thoughts, faith and love. Through faith we belong above to God: through love below to our neighbor. That we may thus lay hold of this truth may God give us his help! Amen.

History

The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise (1463-1525), requested that Martin Luther write a collection of sermons for each Sunday of the year for the benefit of ministers and the common people—those that have the Spirit—to exhort them in sound doctrine but also to convict the gainsayers who oppose the Word and true faith.

This sermon originates from what is commonly called Luther's *Church Postil* collection. He wrote most of the sermons between 1521 and 1527, then supervised editorial assistance with Stephan Roth (1492-1546) until 1535 and Caspar Creuziger (1504-1548) until 1544. During that entire period over seventy-five editions of the collection were published. Many more editions were published after Luther's death in 1546. This sermon can be found in the Erlangen edition vol. II, 335; Walch edition vol. II, 1003; and the St. Louis edition vol. II, 734. It was translated into English by Andrew George Voigt (1859-1933) and edited by John Nicholas Lenker (1858-1929) and published in 1906. Except for his catechisms, Luther's postils were his most influential writings for believers. |

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