

Those with an Ear are of God—Keeping the Word

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Judica)

Sermon on John 8:46-59

Author: Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546) Year: 1531~1535

Text

⁴⁶Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? ⁴⁷He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God. ⁴⁸Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil? ⁴⁹Jesus answered, I have not a devil; but I honour my Father, and ye do dishonour me. ⁵⁰And I seek not mine own glory: there is one that seeketh and judgeth. ⁵¹Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death. ⁵²Then said the Jews unto him, Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. ⁵³Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself? ⁵⁴Jesus answered, If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God: ⁵⁵Yet ye have not known him; but I know him: and if I should say, I know him not, I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him, and keep his saying. ⁵⁶Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. ⁵⁷Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? ⁵⁸Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. ⁵⁹Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by. (John 8:46-59)

Sermon

This is a precious and comprehensive Gospel, concerning which much might be said. It is however too full of import and truth to be wholly considered at one time; we shall therefore confine our attention to the most prominent declaration contained therein, which is that of Christ: "*He that is of God heareth God's words, ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.*"

These are very plain words, so that no one, at first glance, would judge them to contain so deep a meaning. But when we look at these words closely, and carefully meditate upon them, when we ask what it means to be or not to be of God, we will discover how important a subject is here mentioned by Christ. For we cannot pronounce a severer judgment upon any one, or reproach him more decisively, than by saying that he is not of God. To be called a knave or a villain, or to be murdered in cold blood, is nothing compared with the horrible misery which the Lord describes in few words,

when he says to the Jews: "*Ye are not of God.*" It is therefore the chief thing necessary gladly to hear and diligently to retain the Word of God.

In the narrative of our Gospel we can clearly see that all those who do not wish to hear the Word of God, but speak evil of it, follow the devil whithersoever he leads them, until they are finally wholly his own; they sink lower and lower in their degradation from day to day. The Jews at first, when Christ begins to preach, are angry; afterwards they rail upon Him, calling Him a Samaritan and one "*who has a devil.*" Here we see how rapidly they fell, sinking ten fathoms deeper into hell than before, Soon after they become still more foolish and ask: "*Whom makest Thou Thyself?*" In short, they become worse and worse in their denunciations, until they come to an open assault, and like murderers pick up stones to throw at Christ for the purpose of killing Him. They committed this awful crime because they had despised the Word of God, and would not hear the preaching of Christ, but blasphemed Him. All this was an evident indication, according to the statement of the Lord, that the Jews were of the devil; for if they had been of God, they would have conducted themselves differently towards His Word, which Christ preached.

The reason why children in our day are so frequently disobedient and disrespectful towards their parents, will be found in their disregard of the Word of God. They are unwilling to hear it; or if they do hear it they neither learn nor retain it. If they have once begun, in opposition to the will of God, to despise their parents, they will not stop here in their career of sin, but will soon begin to curse their father and their mother, and though they do not strike or slay them with the hand, they still wish them dead; or they will lead such an abominable life of infamy and crime, that their parents will grieve themselves to death.

Thus it is everywhere. He who will not hear the Word of God, nor follow its precepts, becomes a liar, a slanderer and a persecutor. The Papists are a living example of this fact; day after day they grow madder and more raging, nor will they desist from their blasphemy and persecution, until they become murderers and instigators of great bloodshed.

Such conduct is the most criminal, If a man is given to other sins it is possible to convince him of his wrong, so that he desist from his wickedness. But it is utterly in vain to attempt to convince the Papists, and also many among us, that they do a great wrong if they are unwilling to hear the Word of God, and even despise and defame it. They are so corrupt as to imagine that they do this rightfully and meritoriously. The cause of this is that they deny this word to be God's Word; they regard it as the devil's doctrine and sheer falsehood; and the preachers of it are in their eyes the most despicable heretics and seducers from the truth. The Jews did the same when they called Christ a Samaritan. With this assertion they made manifest their thoughts, in regard to teaching, thus claiming for the most abominable sin an appearance of great sanctity.

The very devil himself is loose among the people, when they fall into the sin of disregarding the Word of God, so that they will neither hear nor heed it. The result is that they will openly persecute Christ, as did the Jews, who hurled stones at Him, and finally nailed Him to the cross, claiming impunity for such a horrible crime. Be careful then that you do not follow their example.

It is therefore a sharp and severe word which Christ says to the Jews: "*Ye hear not the Word of God, because ye are not of God.*" For he who is not of God is of the devil, and has corruption and pestilence, and every other hellish plague upon his back; we could not invoke greater evils upon him. Alas, that this great and horrible sin is so prevalent among all classes of men! How many will you find, among rich and poor, who will lay it to heart as an awful announcement when you tell them: My

friends, it is not well that you do not hear the preaching of God's Word, or if you hear it that you do not heed it; it must be that you are not of God! The greater part of these people would answer: What do I care for the Church; I know well enough what I have to do! And if you should still further tell them: Stop and consider; if you desire to be saved you must amend in this respect,—then will you discover that these people will only become more enraged by your admonition, turning you off with harsh and vulgar words, demanding of you to let them alone, or they will teach you your business with their fists.

Such stubbornness and wrath is terrible, so that a Christian heart trembles at the thought of it, especially when it is borne in mind what Christ says: "*He that heareth not the words of God is not of God, but is the devil's child.*" The most deplorable circumstance in this connection is the infatuation, in which these defamers of God's Word live, so that they do not perceive the error of their ways, but defend their conduct with bitter resolution. Thus did the Jews; they answered Christ: "*Say we not well that Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil?*" A self-righteous devil, who thinks that he is always right, is the worst of all devils; and such an one was prompting the Jews.

This is the first lesson taught in our Gospel, that they who will not hear the Word of God are not of Him, but of the devil. This, of course, does not mean that the devil created such persons with their body, mind and all they possess. No, God bestowed upon them these gifts, wherefore we must distinguish between the abilities of man and their use. The man who lies and cheats has a good tongue given to him by God, but the use which he makes of it is of the devil in whose service he abuses it against God. Thus also God may give to man beautiful and charming eyes, but their employment for lustfulness is of the devil. If the heart yearns after lewdness, falsehood and deceit, it is wicked and of the devil, in respect to its use, though it be good and of God as to its essence.

On the other hand, "*to be of God*" means to employ willingly and gladly the ears in hearing the Word of God, and to accept rebuke for that which is wrong. Thus we should also use the tongue to pray, to preach, to instruct and to give consolation. Ears and tongues thus engaged are of God and good; they accomplish the purpose for which they were given. The heart also, if it meditates upon that which is comely, upon what is beneficial for our fellow men, and does not give offense, is a creature of God as well as the ears and the tongue. It is "*of God,*" because it strives to follow the precepts of God, and loves to hear His Word, and shuns everything opposed to it. It may happen, alas! that we are overtaken unaware by our weakness; that we curse where we ought to pray, and give way to anger where we ought to manifest kindness; but if we see our wrong and confess it, asking for mercy, we may then indeed have wavered, or even fallen, but we are not yet of the devil. If a man repents of his sins, and turns to God with the firm resolution to avoid that which is wrong, he will obtain mercy, and the devil is not his master.

The children of the devil are they who are obstinate in their wickedness, who care naught for instruction and admonition, but steadily pursue their sinful course. Such persons are "*of the devil,*" and will become worse and worse, since he continually urges them onward in their crime. At first they disregard the Word, then they blaspheme and scorn and curse it. Finally they are filled with murderous desires, as the Jews were when they took up stones. The devil can easily be detected by his promptings to disrespect the Word of God, to defame and curse it, to do evil unto others, and to seek the death of the preachers of the Gospel. Such manifestations point out the devil and his offspring beyond all doubt; he is a liar and a murderer, an enemy of God and His Word.

Let us therefore be vigilant, that we may avoid the sin of disregarding the Word of God, but let us hear it right gladly. If we thus hear and retain it, conforming our lives to its precepts, we can be assured that we are of God and are His children. The others can also know beforehand their doom; they are children of the devil. Since they reject the Word, they lose all hope of righteousness and life, but wallow, if I may be permitted the expression, in the filthy excrements of the devil. Nor does their wealth, or high position in the world, suffice to cover their sin. The pope with the entire crowd of his followers is guilty of this sin, for he will not permit the Word of God to rule, and persecutes and slays the Christians. This is the devil's true calling.

To hear God's Word with a willing heart indicates, on the other hand, that such people are of God. God is no murderer, but a Creator of life; the devil however has never created nor infused life into any one. As God is the God of life, so shall they, who are of Him and hear His Word, also have life, according to the declaration of Christ: "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.*"

What is meant by "*keeping the Word of God?*" To believe what Christ in His Gospel tells us concerning the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and firmly to retain such faith and hope. He who does this has eternal life, nor will sin, hell and judgment terrify him, since grace and mercy prevail. Death will indeed overcome him, but not with those terrible feelings, which they experience who die without faith and in the presence of the devil. These die unwillingly, with violent convulsions and with bellowings similar to those of cattle; they obstinately resist death, but still must die. If they could, they would put walls of adamant between themselves and death.

Christ declares that it shall not be thus with His disciples who hear and keep His Word. They will be exempt from such terror and suffering upon their death-bed. They trust in their God and are content, falling asleep in death, in the sure hope of a better life. Peaceably, and without trembling, they bid farewell to this world. For death, though he executes his power also upon the bodies of the believers, will for them lose his sting, so that they will meet him as a harbinger inviting to rest.

Thus it often occurs that the poor convicts, who are publicly put to death, die with resignation, and without such mad ravings as people indulge in who are without the consolation of the Word of God.

Consider therefore, my dear children, what great advantage you have, if you willingly hear and learn the Word of God. Learn, first of all, that you are of God, having conquered the devil and hell, so that neither sin nor the judgment of God can terrify. You will also be enabled to endure calmly other annoyances which, though they be ever so trifling, make the world impatient and hopeless.

It is true, the Christians must suffer much from the devil and the world, their bitter enemies. Their body and life, their possession and honor are often in great danger. How shall they endure all this with patience? In no other way than by clinging to the promises of God, so that they can exclaim: Let the world wag and do as it pleases, I am not of her, but of God, else would the world be my friend; but I prefer that she should hate and harass me on every side, to having her good will and then to be not of God. If the heart is thus minded, all tribulation and adversity will pass by as do the clouds in the sky or the birds in the air; we see them for a time and then no more.

Our only comfort in this life must be the possession of the Word and its power, especially when the last hour comes, when death approaches. If we believe the Word with a childlike faith, death will be as a sleep to us. Yea, it will be as when one who journeys along in a dense mist is attacked and slain before he is aware of the presence of the murderer. The devil is indeed a murderer, who has

determined upon our death; we know that well. But this his threat and sure attack shall not alarm us. We have the Word, to it we cling; that causes resignation, joy and courage in the presence of dire visitations, even of death. The confidence that through Christ we have in heaven a Father, kind and merciful, will give us strength and patience to endure with true fortitude all the trials of life to the end. This consolation we find in the Word, and nowhere else.

Tell me then, should this not be the chief endeavor of man, to obtain amid the various trials and sorrows of life this consolation, thus to be happy and contented? Yet all these adverse experiences in our daily life are insignificant, compared with the last and greatest evil, death. No physician, skillful though he be, nor advice or assistance of any mortal being can aid and rescue us from the terror of this our foe; Christ alone, our Lord and Savior, must be our help. He gives us a remedy, so sure and so effective, that everything else which we possess is valueless compared with it.

How is this truth observed among us? When God offers this remedy, even at our own hearthstones, we reject it. Hence it happens that we are not of God and fall from one sin into the other, and become more wicked day after day, as has been shown above. If then the dying hour comes, we have no hope, nor consolation, so that we wind and twist ourselves in agony upon our bed, lamenting and crying, yea, even bellowing as an ox before the slaughter.

The chief lesson of our Gospel to-day is the exhortation to learn the Word of God with a ready heart, and to keep it in faith. If we do this, we shall be conquerors over sin, death and hell. Let death devour us as he may, we shall not feel the piercing of his fangs. The Word of Christ is our armor, through which we shall obtain a peaceable death and life eternal.

The wicked and the lawless, who despise the Word, have already the severest punishment possible; since they heed not the Word of God they are not of Him. What more terrific judgment could be pronounced upon a wicked child, which despises the command of God and disobeys its parents, than to call it the child of the devil? Truly, this is no light matter. I for my part would rather be in the hands of the executioner or the cannibals, than to be a victim of the devil, who is a liar and murderer, and thrusts into everlasting damnation.

Be careful to avoid such calamity. Learn, I beg you, learn with all diligence, to appreciate the treasure which is yours in the word of your Lord Jesus Christ. Remember that outside of the Word there are no means of escape from the devil, sin and eternal death; hence it must be accepted in confidence and firm faith.

When Christ says: *“If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death,”* He has no reference to the Law given by Moses to the Jews, which is indeed proper, good and holy, but cannot be fully observed by us, because we are sinners by nature and children of wrath. Hence the Law is a savor unto death; it points out our transgressions and their well-merited punishment. We need then another Word which takes away our sins and justifies us before God. Such a Word we have in the Gospel of Christ, where He gives us the comfortable assurance: *“If a man believeth in me, he shall never see death.”*

This saying requires faith; we must not doubt in the least that what Christ here declares is true. If we would leave the Word out of view, and would judge according to our own knowledge and perception, we would see nothing but death. We must therefore in our great affliction of sin never judge by what we see or feel, but by the Word, so that we can say: I perceive that I must die, but I also have the assurance of Christ and His Word that I shall live again through Him. He has paid my

ransom from death, which was caused by my sins; God is merciful unto me and will give eternal life on account of His death and resurrection. He who has such faith keeps the Word; but it is not easily done, since flesh and blood are averse to faith and would always rather judge according to what they see and feel. We should never entertain such faithlessness, but pray to God for His Holy Spirit to strengthen our hearts in the Word, and to keep us in the true faith evermore.

The Lord tells us also, in conclusion, the reason why His Word is so effective and powerful; at which assertion the Jews became so enraged that they took up stones to kill Him. They could not understand the declaration of Christ that His Word would save from eternal death, since they knew that Moses, Abraham and other holy men of whom the Scriptures make mention, had died; men whom they regarded as superiors of Christ. Hence they concluded that it was a vain boast to speak of His Word as He did. But Christ answered: "*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it and was glad.*" That is, if Abraham had not believed in my Word he would have died an eternal death, for "*I am before Abraham was.*" I am the eternal and omnipotent God, whoever wishes to escape death and live forever must be saved by me. This neither Moses nor any other prophet could say of themselves, for they were all human; Christ however is God and man, therefore He and none other is able to give life and salvation.

This declaration is very consoling, and a sure testimony of our faith that Christ is the Son of God, true man and true God from eternity. Similar proofs of this truth we find in other parts of the Gospel. We should therefore place our whole confidence in Him alone, and trust firmly in His Word, for it is the Word of God and cannot lie. Whatever He says is true, and must be true in all eternity. Through this Word God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. I repeat, therefore, learn with diligence this important truth, and praise God for such instruction, and pray that He may, through His Holy Spirit, retain us in the Word and save us for evermore through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

History

Martin Luther and his wife Katharina made their household in the Black Cloister, a former Augustinian monastery presented to them as a wedding gift by the Elector of Saxony, Johann the Steadfast (1468-1532). There they raised their children, several orphans, and hosted dozens of students, boarders, and guests. Between 1531 and 1535 when he was unable to preach in church on Sundays due to frail health, he preached to his household and friends from an outline he prepared after studying the Biblical text.

This sermon originates from what is commonly called Luther's *House Postil* collection. These sermons were recorded by Veit Dietrich (1506-1549) and published in 1544 with Luther's permission: "*I delivered these sermons in my house at various times, to the members of my household, so that as the head of the household I might do my part in instructing those under me how to lead a Christian life.*" It was translated into English by E. Schmid, edited by Matthias Loy (1828-1915) in 1869, and published by J. A. Schulze in 1884. Except for his catechisms, Luther's postils were his most influential writings for believers.

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