

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
Luke 6:36-42

Today, Jesus teaches us about *right* judgment. And this right judgment must be driven by the first verse in our Gospel reading:

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (v. 36)

The Christian understands mercy because they have been shown mercy. You should notice here that Jesus is talking with His disciples and not to the world. The world doesn't understand mercy. It cannot. It's a dog-eat-dog world where only the strong survive. If you observe the world apart from God, you observe Darwin's maxim of the survival of the fittest. It's a cold world that leaves many weak animals and people in the ditches. There's no compassion. Everything is boiled down to the instinct for survival and reproduction.

But you are not of the world.

You are in Christ. In Christ is the only place where mercy can be found. Jesus was the strong man who conquered the world. He lived a perfect life blameless of any sin. He loved God with all His heart, mind, soul, and strength. He loved His neighbor as Himself. Everything He did succeeded. He healed many of their infirmities, cast out demons, and preached good news to the poor. But the world rejected Him and killed Him. He didn't conquer the world in the way the world understands. He surrendered Himself to His Father's will and the cross for the benefit of the world. He gave His perfect life as a ransom for the whole world. His suffering and death paid for the sin of the entire world. The sin of everyone who has lived, lives now, or who will live is paid for by the work of Jesus. The blood of Jesus which covers sin is applied to you in your Baptism so that you receive the forgiveness of all your sins. The blood of Jesus is pronounced in Holy Absolution so that you know beyond a shadow of doubt your sins are forgiven.

The blood of Jesus is fed to you during the Lord's Supper so that you are strengthened in the forgiveness that is yours with that very same blood. You understand mercy because you have had it applied to you directly "from the pastor as from God Himself."

To understand this mercy fully, you must first understand right judgment. Right judgment starts with yourself and the Word of God. Jesus says,

First take the log [of sin] out of your own eye. (v. 42)

Again, remember that Jesus is talking to believers. Before God, all sin is equally wicked. Before men, there are degrees of sin. But Jesus likens your sin to a log and your neighbor's sin to a speck. Even if your neighbor's sin is as black as night, his sin is still a speck and your sin is a log. You must first take care of the log in your own eye. This can only be done by examining yourself against the perfect Law of God. And you know this is a continual practice. Paul describes the life of the Christian as a continual struggle against sin.

The unbeliever doesn't care about their sin. They may care about the consequences of sin, but they don't struggle with God's Word. In God's mercy, He sends temporal consequences for our sin so that we learn contrition and repentance. This applies to the believer and unbeliever. Sin has consequences whether done by an unbeliever or believer. The consequences are meant to teach us to turn from sin to life, that is, turn from sin to Jesus. We experience this struggle daily. We are instructed about this struggle through our baptism. We confess in our Small Catechism concerning the impact of Baptism:

[Baptism] indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Contrition and repentance are driven by the Law of God.

The Law of God teaches us what sin is and how wicked we are in the old man. It terrifies us with the punishment of eternal damnation. It teaches us to be disappointed in how we've let our heavenly Father down. Contrition is sorrow over sin. It can mean both terror over the punishment of sin or the awareness that we have not lived as our heavenly Father commands us. Repentance drives us to confession. As you know from the Small Catechism:

Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

God gives us the gift of confession and absolution so that we might not live with the consequences with our sin. It is true that you may have temporal consequences to your sin. These teach ourself and others to avoid that sin. But the eternal consequences are paid for. You do not need to live with regret, sorrow, or shame. As King David says:

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (Ps 51:7)

The "shall be" here doesn't refer to the end of time when Jesus comes to restore all things, but *right* now. You are clean now. You are whiter than snow now. Before God. And before men. Even if men don't treat you that way. Paul warns us in today's Epistle reading that we will have suffering in this world. Even though we are clean and whiter than snow, we still live in a world beset by sin. But be of good cheer. Jesus is coming again soon. Did you realize you are judged in Him already? You are judged as clean and whiter than snow. This is what Jesus means when He says:

*Whoever believes in [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
(John 3:18)*

But we all fall prey to taking the Law of God lightly. Either we think we already know it, or we think we have overcome it. We treat our salvation as something already attained and we don't have to worry about it regardless of how we live. We ignore Paul's admonition to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil 2:12) Or worse, we think like the Pharisees, and think we have mastered the law. We forget the words of our Lord who tells us that we "must be perfect, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect." (Math 5:48)

Repent!

Let's look at an example. One commandment that is especially applicable to today's gospel is the eighth commandment:

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

At first blush, this seems like it is only saying that we must not lie in a court of law. But there is so much more to this commandment as Luther rightly points out. We understand not lying about our neighbor or not betraying him, but must we really explain everything in the kindest way? This would help some of you on Facebook. Ouch, right?

The "Treasury of Daily Prayer" has a helpful section for preparing for confession and absolution.

It's only in the print version and not the app, but I can get you a copy if you need it. Listen to these questions concerning the eighth commandment:

Do I speak the truth or have I lied in any way?

Do I gossip or take pleasure in talking about the faults and mistakes of others?

Do I uphold and defend the name and reputation of others?

Have I judged others without being duly authorized to do so?

Have I gladly and willingly found ways to explain in the best possible way the words or actions of those who hurt me?

Am I first to admit my own mistakes, or do I cover up my sins and make myself look better than I am?

Are you still with me? The law of God cuts deep! And we could find even more ways in which we violate God's perfect eighth commandment.

If this has cut you deeply; if you are sorry and want to do better, hear the word of God:

I by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We must apply God's Law to ourselves first. And when you have received the mercy of God, then and only then, are you prepared to judge others.

Jesus says,

“How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.” (Luke 6:42)

Jesus is not nice and calls you a hypocrite when you judge without recognizing your own sin, but He doesn’t tell you not to judge your neighbor. You must first deal with your own sin. But then you are in the best place to judge.

Wouldn’t you warn someone if they were going to drive off a cliff or shoot themselves in the foot? Would it be loving to watch someone destroy themselves without saying a word?

But you don’t warn your neighbor as someone who has earned the forgiveness of God. You warn them as someone who has received the grace of God as pure gift and you know where your neighbor can find the same thing! Paul warns us in Romans about this attitude. He’s talking about our attitude towards the Jew in this specific instance:

“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature,

into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.” (Romans 11:17–24)

But this applies just as well with those who are not of the vine and need grafted into God’s grace. If Jesus is kind to us, who deserve it least of all, how can we not be kind to others who are no less deserving than us of God’s grace and kindness. Consider the Old Testament reading.

Joseph’s brothers had been forgiven already. Joseph had pronounced forgiveness and provided his brothers with the land of Goshen. But when Jacob, their father, died, they expected Joseph to treat them how they would treat others. They did not trust the pronouncement of forgiveness by God through the mouth of Joseph. Joseph could not treat them with unkindness because he had received so much grace and kindness from God.

Do some of you mistrust the pronouncement of the forgiveness of your sins? If you don’t believe the forgiveness of your sins and the grace and kindness of God, it is hard for you to treat others with mercy and kindness. But as our Lord told Thomas, do not be unbelieving but believe. You have the forgiveness of sins. You have eternal life. You are clean. You are whiter than snow. Right now.

Believe it and you will live in a life of mercy towards others. And your heavenly Father will be glorified.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.