

# GOSPEL FOR THE VIGIL OF THE LORD'S FAST OR QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

Luke 18:31-43

*Taking the twelve, He said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging Him, they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise." But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. As He drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to Him. And when he came near, He asked him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed Him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.*

1. This Gospel also presents us with the two points, faith and love, both in Christ, who says that He must go to Jerusalem and let Himself be tormented, and in the blind man whom Christ serves and helps. The first point, faith, proves that Scripture will not be fulfilled except by Christ's suffering and that Scripture speaks about nothing other than Christ; everything has to do with Christ, who must fulfill [Scripture] by His death [Luke 18:1]. But if His death must do this, then our death will add nothing, for our death is a sinful and cursed death. But if our death, which is the highest and severest suffering and misfortune, is sin and cursed, what else should our suffering and torment merit? If our suffering is nothing and useless, what should our good works do, since suffering is always nobler and better than works? Christ must here be all alone, and faith must cling to this.

2. He spoke these words [Luke 18:31-33] before He had completed His suffering, when He was on the way, traveling to Jerusalem and to the

Passover. The disciples did not at all expect His suffering and thought that they would be happy at the festival. He did this so that afterward they would become even stronger in faith, when they realized that He said these things beforehand, then willingly went to His suffering and was crucified, but not by the power and cleverness of the Jews, His enemies. Long before, Isaiah had prophesied that He would willingly and gladly give Himself as a sacrifice (Isaiah 53 [:7]). On Easter Sunday the angel admonishes the women to remember these words which He had spoken to them [Luke 24:6], so that they would know and even more firmly believe that He suffered this willingly for our good.

3. The right basis for knowing Christ's suffering is to know and understand not only His suffering but also His heart and will for that suffering. Whoever looks at His suffering without seeing His will and heart in them must be terrified at it rather than rejoice in it. But if we see His heart and will in [His suffering], this produces true comfort, confidence, and joy in Christ. For this reason Psalm 40 [:7–8] praises this will of God and of Christ in suffering: "In the book it is written of Me that I should do Your will, O My God, and I do it gladly." The Epistle to the Hebrews says: "By that will we all have been sanctified" (Hebrews [10:10]). He does not say "through the suffering and blood of Christ" (which is certainly true), but "through the will of God and of Christ," because they both were of one will: to sanctify us through the blood of Christ.

Here in the Gospel He points out His will for suffering when He first prophesies that He will go to Jerusalem and be crucified [Luke 18:31–33], as if He would say: "Look into My heart, and see that I do this willingly, freely, and gladly, so that you will not be frightened or shocked when you see it, and so that you will not think that I do this reluctantly, that I have to do it, that I am forsaken, and that the Jews are doing this with their power."

4. But the disciples did not understand these words (he says), and the words were "hidden from them" [Luke 18:34]. That is as much as to say: Reason, flesh, and blood cannot understand or grasp that Scripture had to speak about how the Son of Man must be crucified. Much less does it understand that this is His will and that He does it gladly. It does not believe that this is necessary for us, but it wants to deal with God on the basis of its works. Rather, God must reveal this in the heart through His Spirit, even after it is proclaimed externally in words in their ears. Even those to whom the Spirit reveals it scarcely believe it, but struggle with it. It is a great and wonderful thing that the Son of Man is crucified willingly and gladly to fulfill Scripture, that is, for our good. It is a mystery and remains a mystery.

5. As a result of this, how foolish are those who teach that people should patiently bear their sufferings and death in order to do penance and obtain

grace! Those are especially [foolish] who comfort those who should be executed by the judgment of the court or otherwise should die. They assert that if they bear it willingly, then for that reason all their sins will be forgiven them. They mislead the people, for they hide Christ and His death on which we trust and lead the people to false trust in their own suffering and dying. This is the very worst thing a man can experience at the end of his life; by it he is led directly into hell.

But you should learn to say: "What death! What patience! My dying is nothing; I will not have it or hear of it for my comfort. Christ's suffering and death are my comfort on which I trust, and through it my sins are forgiven. Freely I will endure my death for the praise and glory of my God and for the advantage and service of my neighbor, but I will not at all rely on it."

6. It is one thing to die boldly or to endure death patiently, or otherwise to bear pain willingly, and it is a completely different thing to blot out sin and obtain grace before God by such dying or suffering. The first has certainly been done by the heathen, and many worthless scoundrels and rough people still do it. However, the second, like all other lies, is a poisonous, deadly addition devised by Satan, by which he has caused our confidence and comfort to be in our own doings and works. We must guard against this.

Just as much as I should resist anyone who teaches me that I should enter a monastery if I want to be saved, so much should I also oppose anyone who would set up my own dying or suffering for my comfort and hope in my last hour, as if that would be useful to me for washing away my sins. Both of these things deny God and His Christ, slander His grace, and turn His Gospel upside down. Those who hold a crucifix before the dying and remind them of the death and suffering of Christ do much better.

7. I must relate an example and experience that serves well here and is not to be despised. There was a good hermit, who had been educated in this faith in human merit, who had to comfort a dying man, so he boldly went ahead and comforted him in this way: "My friend, only endure your death patiently and willingly, and I will pledge my soul that you will be a child of eternal life." Well, he promised he would, and then died patiently with this comfort. Three or four days later, the hermit also became mortally sick, and the true master, Remorse, came and opened his eyes so that he saw what he had done and taught. He lay there until he died and lamented the advice and comfort he had given that man: "Alas, what have I advised him!" Frivolous people laughed at him, that he did not do what he had taught another to do. On his soul he told another to die cheerfully, and he himself now despairs, not only because of death but also because of the advice he had given so confidently and now so publicly rebuked and retracted.

But God surely said to him what is written in Luke 4 [:23]: "Master, now help yourself," and another passage: "So it happens to one who is not rich toward God" [Luke 12:21]. Here for sure one blind man led another, and both fell into the pit [Luke 6:39], and both were condemned: the first, because he passed on into death [trusting] in his own patience; the second, because he despaired of God's grace, did not acknowledge it, and then thought that if he had not committed the sin, he would have passed on into heaven. Christ remained unknown and denied by both of them.

So some books went astray [on this point], in which St. Augustine and others emphasized statements that death is a door to life and a medicine against sin. People did not see that these words are to be understood about Christ's death and suffering.

As insignificant as this example is, it teaches us in a masterly way that no work, no suffering, no death can help or stand the test before God. Here we cannot deny that the first man did the greatest work, namely, he underwent death with patience, in which his free will did its best; and yet he was lost, as the second man confesses and proves with his despair. Whoever does not believe these two men will have to find it out for himself.

8. We have been discussing faith in the suffering of Christ. Just as He has now willingly given Himself for us, so we also, according to His example of love, should give ourselves for our neighbor, with all that we have. We have spoken sufficiently elsewhere on the fact that Christ is to be preached in these two ways.<sup>1</sup> But these are words which no one wants to understand; the Word is hidden, for "the fleshly man does not understand what is divine," etc. [Luke 18:34; 1 Cor. 2:14].

9. The second part is the blind man, in whom we see shining brightly both love in Christ for the blind man and faith in the blind man toward Christ. We want to look briefly at the faith of the blind man.

10. First, he hears people saying that Christ "is passing by" [Luke 18:37]; previously, he had heard that Jesus of Nazareth was a good man who helps everyone who calls on Him. His faith and confidence in Christ grew out of what he heard, so that he did not doubt that He would also help him. He could not have had such faith in his heart if he had not heard and known about Christ, for faith does not come except by hearing [Rom. 10:17].

11. Second, he believes firmly and does not doubt that what he heard about Him was true, as the following signs prove. Even though he recognized Him, he still does not see or know Christ, and could not see or know whether Christ had the heart and will to help him; rather, he believed exactly what he had heard about Him. He based his confidence on [Christ's] reputation and on these words, and therefore was not disappointed.

1 See *Short Instruction* (1522), LW 75:8–9.

12. Third, in accord with this faith he calls and prays [Luke 18:38–39], as St. Paul describes the order: “How will they call on Him if they do not believe?” Likewise: “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be helped” (Romans 10 [:14, 13]).

13. Fourth, he also freely confesses Christ and fears no one. Because of his pressing need, he does not ask for anyone else. True faith is such that it confesses Christ as the one who can and will help, while others are ashamed of Him and afraid of the world.

14. Fifth, he struggles not only with his conscience, which without a doubt agitated him because he is unworthy, but also with those who threatened him and told him to be quiet [Luke 18:39]. They wanted to terrify his conscience and make him fearful, so that he would look at his unworthiness and Christ’s worthiness and then despair. Wherever faith begins, struggle and strife also begin.

15. Sixth, he stands firm, prevails, and wins. He does not let the whole world tear him from his confidence, not even his own conscience. Therefore, he maintains his request and overcomes Christ, so that He stops, tells them to bring him, and offers to do whatever he wants [Luke 18:40–42]. So it happens with all who only hold firmly to the Word of God; close their eyes and ears against the devil, the world, and themselves; and act just as if they and God were alone in heaven and on earth.

16. Seventh, he follows Christ [Luke 18:43]; that is, he walks on the way of love and of the cross, on which Christ walks, does righteous works, is in a good estate and way of life, and is not occupied with foolishness, as the work-saints are.

17. Eighth, he thanks and praises God [Luke 18:43] and offers a righteous sacrifice which is pleasing to God. “The one who offers thanksgiving praises Me; and there is the path, that I show him the salvation of God” (Psalm 50 [:23]).

18. Ninth, he causes many others to praise God [Luke 18:43], seeing him,<sup>2</sup> for a Christian is useful and helpful for everyone, and besides praises and honors God on earth.

19. Finally, let us see how Christ encourages us with works and words to believe. First with works, in that He takes such a firm interest in the blind man, makes it clear how pleasing faith is to Him, so that He is captivated, stops, and does what the blind man desires in his faith. Second, He praises his faith in words and says, “Your faith has made you well” [Luke 18:42]. He throws the honor of the miracle away from Himself and attributes it to the

<sup>2</sup> *an ihm*, i.e., seeing what God had done to him.

faith of the blind man. In summary, faith is granted what it asks, and it is moreover our great honor before God.<sup>3</sup>

20. This blind man signifies the spiritually blind, that is, each person born from Adam who does not see or know the kingdom of God; it is grace when he feels and knows his blindness and desires to be freed from it. Those are the holy sinners who sense their faults and sigh for grace.

He sits along the road and begs [Luke 18:35]; that is, he sits among the teachers of the Law and desires help. Begging means that he must struggle with works alone and have recourse only to them. The people pass by and leave him sitting there; that is, the people of the Law are noisy and let their doctrine of works be heard. They want to precede Christ and Christ can follow them.

He hears Christ; that is, when a heart hears about the Gospel and faith, it calls and cries and has no rest until it comes to Christ. Those who would silence and scold him [Luke 18:39] are the teachers of works, who want to suffocate and quiet the doctrine and reputation of faith, but they stir up hearts all the more. The Gospel is such that the more it is restrained, the more it increases. After he received his sight, all his work and life are nothing but the praise and honor of God. He follows Christ with joy, which surprises and improves the whole world [Luke 18:43].