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## Homiletics

George W. Hoyer  
*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

Mack Goeglein  
*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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# HOMILETICS

## *"That the Word Be Not Bound"*

*For most readers of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY the task of preaching is a deeply personal chore. For most it is also a deeply personal privilege. We ought, therefore, to speak directly to one another about common involvement in this ministry of the Word in the pulpit. This month's article presents exactly such a person-to-person comment on the preaching task. The staff anticipates that each preacher's reaction after reading this article will be deep appreciation to Mack Goeglein for opening up himself along with his subject. Many of you will find his presentation a significant assist in opening up yourself for your people from the pulpit you share with them.*

*In addition to the article's incisive assertions, the author is ready to set up two of his own sermons as a kind of case study for examination. Reading his sermons should be a first step in the necessary self-sermon-analysis, which is the only way his words can expedite our words' proclamation of the Word.*

*To catch the personal mood, you will want to read first the author's preface.*

GEORGE W. HOYER

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This is not to be a scholarly essay. The author is a parish preacher who, while he enjoys good theological study, can scarcely be classified as scholar. But I optimistically believe there is value in the observations of a pastor who has discovered preaching to be much more exciting now than when he was ordained 11 years ago.

I do believe I have one great advantage over the professional scholar as far as this particular subject matter is concerned—congregational autonomy. I can, in other words, "call 'em as I sees 'em" with little concern about incurring the wrath of a board or committee. That is what I want to do. I hope the reader will read with a thoughtful and open mind. Afterwards, neither applause nor disagreement will matter too much, since I'm quite sure what I outline here will scarcely form my final, rigid position.

Ten years hence I will probably disown some of what is written now. As you know, psychologically one needs to defend scholarly positions much more heroically than "current observations."

### THE BOUND WORD

A favorite ecclesiastical sport seems to be analyzing in depth the "current Christian dilemma." For some, the dilemma is quite simple and obvious: we're not holding on to pure doctrine. For others, the dilemma is much more varied and complex. Some see a "General Motors" style ecclesiasticism running wild, resulting in much activity in church buildings but little meaningful Christ-like ministry. These critics often make the point that the entire institutional form of the church must change radically. Many deplore the dichotomy existing between "real life" and the "religious life." Others say that today's Christianity seems to most Christians an escape from involvement in the human situation rather than, as intended, the strong impetus for such involvement. These latter analyses seem to me to make much sense. Yet something is lacking in them. I regard them as the symptoms of the disease rather than the disease itself.

It is my conviction that the real dilemma, i.e., the disease rather than the symptoms, is that for quite some time there has been a famine of the Word of God in the Christian church. We have been effectively keeping the Lord from answering our Collect for the Church: ". . . that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people. . . ." Just as it is stupid to say to a person who lacks maturity, "Stop acting like a child," it is also stupid to scream at a Christianity that has



"bound the Word," "Why don't you function like Christ's church?" Both the child and the Word-bound church are simply being what they are: basically self-centered, stuck on themselves because of a very real and fearful insecurity. Maturity frees a child from this kind of thing, allowing him to be a responsible adult; and the lively Gospel-Word frees the Christian from this kind of thing, enabling him to be, like Jesus Christ, a compassionate servant of his brothers. It is inconceivable to me that any Christian community in which that Gospel-Word is truly running loose and beautifully wild could be basically self-centered and fearfully insecure. I believe, then, that the answer to the Christian dilemma of our time is singularly simple: Let the Word loose. This will cure the disease, and the symptoms will go away.

The aim of this essay is to help loose the lively Word as far as the pulpit is concerned. Needless to say, there are many places other than the pulpit, some just as crucial, in which the Word must be loosed in the Christian community, but they are outside this essay's scope. New forms of Sunday morning preaching that will complement, if not replace, the traditional form are also appearing—but these likewise lie outside the scope of this paper.

There are four points I shall set forth for your consideration.

#### *The Purpose of the Pulpit*

The first point is the most important: the purpose of the pulpit is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While this hardly sounds earthshaking, probably the first symptom of any Word-famine would be this very thing, that church pulpits are no longer essentially and faithfully used to *proclaim* the Gospel of Christ. An aspect of that symptom would be the preacher's failure to realize that he may be failing. I believe this is precisely the symptom of the Word-famine found in

many congregations today. Of course, whether you applaud or jeer here will depend to a great extent on what you understand the meaning of "proclaiming the Gospel of Christ" to be. If that is simply a pious phrase which covers the multitude of ecclesiastical verbiage that we label *sermons*, then instead of a Word-famine we're obviously enjoying bumper crops year after year. If it means "exciting" doctrinal reviews and "any talk about Jesus," then again, there is no Word-famine. But if that phrase in connection with pulpit work means that all the preacher's sweat and preparation, the whole period of time spent in the pulpit, all the words said literally *exist* for those moments when the preacher surprises the people with the joy of God merciful through Jesus Christ, for those moments when he specifically frees and quickens them by proclaiming Christ to them, when he changes past-tense talk-about-a-God-back-then into present-tense divine healing and reconciliation now—if that is what is meant by "proclaiming the Gospel," then that lively Word is becoming bound and we may be in the midst of a Word-famine, for this occurs far too seldom.

In its basic, original sense in the New Testament, "Gospel" seems to be that good word about the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ, through which the Spirit of God relates and re-relates men to God as Father. The meat of that Christ-proclamation is forgiveness, mercy, healing, reconciliation. Through such proclamation the Spirit brings men to repentance, the stuff the church is supposed to live on. Out of such proclamation comes new life, resurrection, through which the forgiveness and love of God is let loose in the world through His "loved" ones. It is not primarily something to be talked about; it is something to be proclaimed. I am quite red-faced every time I remember how puzzled and perplexed I used to get during my student days in St. Louis when Richard Caemmerer would hand back one of



my sermon assignments. I would find without fail several marginal comments saying basically the same thing: "Don't talk *about* the Gospel; say the Gospel!" His point didn't sink in. I would go through the sermon, counting all the times I used words like *Jesus*, *Cross*, *blood-bought souls*, and especially *Gospel*, then race off to his study to do battle. I would show him some thrilling sentences like: "The Gospel of Christ is the greatest thing there is! It gives men forgiveness and peace and joy!" and then imply: "If you don't call that 'Gospel,' what is? Look! The word's right there!" It didn't occur to me that when I preached those words to a real congregation, the members were probably thinking: "If that's true, that's really great! That Gospel must really be something! . . . Hope next time God sends us a pastor who'll preach it!" I could not understand the difference between "preaching the Gospel" and "preaching 'ought-to' (moralistic) sermons" or "church-business sermons" while merely adding dutifully a Gospel postscript at the end because "all God's preacher-chillun (especially pure Lutheran ones) are supposed to say something about Jesus' cross."

Perhaps it would be helpful if all preachers would ask themselves at the conclusion of each sermon preparation: Did I prepare this sermon for the obvious purpose of moving the hearer to respond with a joyous, thundering *Te Deum* because of the goodness of God toward him, or did I preach the Gospel accidentally, incidentally, or not at all?

#### *The Peril of the Preacher*

The preacher's greatest temptation probably always has been and still is to sin against the Third Commandment, especially in the sense in which Luther explained it: ". . . that we may not despise preaching and God's Word. . . ." I realize that the preacher's problem is not church bumming (we're paid employees, you know); nor is he in danger of hating Bibles. I do believe this "despising

preaching and God's Word" is seen in the preacher's doubt and misunderstanding.

By "doubt" I do not mean here that most preachers doubt there is a God or doubt that He wrote a Book (at least, these are not his special temptations). I mean rather that we preachers are especially liable to doubt that the proclaimed Gospel of Christ has the intrinsic power to do its job. We fear it may go back to God empty-handed. Think what kind of joy we would have if each time we entered our pulpits we were truly confident that reconciliation, new life, and freedom were surely going to happen because, after all, we are preaching the lively Gospel-Word!

By "misunderstanding" I mean that somehow many Lutheran pastors have apparently concluded that the Word of God is something that helplessly just "sits there," pleading with them to defend it, prove it, and stick up for it, rather than a dynamic thing that wants to be let loose that the Spirit might bless and heal and reconcile.

When such doubts and misunderstandings take over, the result is disastrous. The Word falls into disuse, no matter how much endless talk there is about it. A Word-famine develops. The Word finally gets tightly bound. In the last stages of this sin the pulpit basically becomes a tool for program pushing, church promotion, Lutheran rules, fund raising (we call it *Stewardship*), and polemics against "Commies and Catholics" (we call it "doctrinal instruction").

#### *The Meaning of the Word*

The third point is related to the second. It is a growing conviction of mine that we preachers have this Third Commandment problem because of a fearful narrowing of the concept of the Word of God. It is one thing, for example, to say that the Scripture is Word of God. It is quite another to say: Word of God equals Scripture. I don't think many would make that equation doctrinally.



Yet when it comes to function, it seems that is precisely the equation with which many operate. If this hunch comes close to the truth, it would explain the diminishing emphasis on the "living voice" concept of Gospel-proclamation, which was so pronounced in the early church and the Reformation eras. For Christians who hold to this concept of Gospel-proclamation, the written Scripture Word serves a variety of crucial purposes:

1. Since in itself and in its original function it is kerygmatic, it still can and does serve Christians today with Gospel-proclamation, even though we are separated from its events and its recording in terms of time and circumstances.

2. The New Testament canon, however, was brought together originally for a different, though related reason. The Christian Gospel was being perverted. It was becoming difficult to know who was saying and writing the Gospel. An apostolic standard, a norm, a Gospel safeguard was needed for the church. Thus the canon was formed. I feel it essential for preachers of the Gospel to understand this. The canon was not formed so that, from then on, all the preacher had to do was to verbalize aloud the written Scriptures. The best current preaching of the Gospel is not simply to provide an understanding of the textual background and circumstances and then to read that portion of Scripture ("in a modern translation," of course). Nor is it true to say, even "generally," that the more Bible passages quoted the better a Gospel sermon it was. Indeed, I have rejoiced in great preaching of the Gospel that didn't sound very Biblical at all (i.e., in the sense of hearing portions of Scripture quoted or alluded to). Conversely, I've heard many sermons filled with Scripture wherein no lively Gospel-Word happened at all. It is my conviction that, while a good Gospel sermon must be Biblical, this by no means assures that the grace/forgive-

ness/life goal for which Scripture is the safeguard actually is achieved. That's what the Confessions mean when they talk Gospel.

Luther was strong on this point about the New Testament canon and the living voice of the Gospel. In *Word and Faith*, Gerhard Ebeling notes that Luther insisted the Gospel is really oral preaching (p.312) and then quotes Luther extensively:

. . . In the New Testament the sermons are to be spoken aloud in public and to bring forth in terms of speech and hearing what was formerly hidden in the letter and in secret vision. Forasmuch as the New Testament is nothing else but the unlocking and revealing of the Old Testament . . . that, too, is why Christ Himself did not write His teaching, as Moses did his, but delivered it orally and gave no command to write it. . . . For that reason it is not at all the manner of the New Testament to write books of Christian doctrine, but there should everywhere, without books, be good, learned, spiritually-minded diligent preachers to draw the living word from the ancient Scriptures and constantly bring it to life before the people, as the Apostles did. For before ever they wrote, they had preached to and converted the people by word of mouth, which also was their real apostolic and New Testament work. . . . That books had to be written, however, is at once a great failure and a weakness of spirit that was enforced by necessity and not by the manner of the New Testament.

I can think it worth adding that this quote is from his *Kirchenpostille* (1522). These were written by Luther with his own hand (which makes them different from his other sermons) for the expressed purpose of helping fledgling, insufficiently trained preachers with their preaching.

It is also worth noting something about Luther's famous "inner canon" or "canon within the canon" concept. Non-Lutheran Christians keep accusing Lutherans of holding to this theory, and evangelical Lutherans, at least, keep on responding: "Guilty! Praise



God, we're guilty!" The respected, ecumenically minded Catholic scholar, Georges Tavad, implies sympathetically: "Luther was fine. It's just too bad he took one doctrine (doctrine of justification by grace through faith) and dominated Scripture with it, making the rest conform to it . . . or else!" (Note: Tavad's thought, not his words.) Tavad was dead right, and in my opinion that is still what an evangelical Lutheran is like. He's "one track," obsessed with a doctrine. When Luther had to judge the very Scriptures themselves (i. e., portions of them) by that Gospel-doctrine, he did. The happy fact is that it was basically the Scriptures themselves (again, portions of them) that made Luther one-track, so Scripture was basically "beloved friend" of the Gospel, not "enemy." Yet, perhaps because the Gospel-Word has become so bound, it is necessary to add that, even when it seemed to Luther that he had to make a choice between a part or book of Scripture and "that" doctrine, there really was no choice. That is why James and Esther were treated so roughly by the one-track Reformer, who, I am sure, loved the Bible more deeply than all its current fearful defenders put together. I am convinced that, had we not somehow forgotten one-track Luther and his emphasis on the living Gospel voice, we would not be in the pulpit dilemma of which I speak. It is only when "that" doctrine and its practical application (i. e., the preaching of the Gospel) cease dominating all doctrine (and the Scripture itself if need be . . . and we should be most happy because she scarcely "needs be"! ) and becomes one doctrine among many, that the Word is bound to get bound and a famine develop.

#### *Texts and the Sermon*

A fourth point: because functionally the Scripture is both kerygmatic and normative, it will certainly serve well as the springboard for evangelical preaching in new, real situa-

tions in which the Gospel-Word should happen again. This is why I strongly prefer Biblical texts for preaching, in most situations, even though there is nothing sacrosanct in this practice. Obviously, one doesn't have to preach "on the Bible" to preach the Gospel (i. e., in this Lutheran sense, "to preach Biblically"). Yet, because Scripture is itself kerygmatic and normative, it makes sense to keep this custom. The important thing, however, is that we do not despise our preaching of the Gospel when we preach it. In other words, the basic difference between present-day preaching of the Gospel and, for example, St. Paul's preaching of the Gospel lies in the fact that, as an apostle, his words are normative and ours aren't. There are surely other differences too, but this one great fact binds Paul and us together: the Gospel he preached and the Gospel we preach (assuming it *is* Gospel) are both absolutely, unconditionally the Word of God.

#### *The Task of the Sermon*

The last point is crucial. A certain question must yet be considered. The question is: What does God want His lively Word to do for and to the ones who hear it? Answer: He wants it to destroy sinners and create sons. And He wants this to happen for the Christian as a lifelong process, not just once at his baptism or conversion, as some in the early church were prone to think. This was, you remember, the point of the very first of Luther's 95 Theses. The whole life of the Christian is to be one of repentance. So God through His Word is after our continued death and resurrection in repentance. He wants our baptism to keep on going. In this basic sense, then, the purpose of the Word of God is repentance. To bring about such death and resurrection, the Word of God is dual in nature. As Law, the Word of God is indictment—it is prosecutor-judge-executioner, all in one. It was not accidental that Luther's favorite phrase for the law of God



was "God's hangman." It was also not accidental that Melancthon's confessional term for the Law's basic function was *lex semper accusat*. By the Law-Word (both lively and deadly in this case) we sinners are destroyed, so that resurrection can happen. This resurrection is brought about through the lively Gospel-Word. While Law/Gospel is hardly a phrase alien to Lutheran preachers, we need to consider it more closely.

A. The Law has a fantastic job to do. People can't thrill to resurrection if they are unaware of their death. In current preaching, I see two great abuses of the Law rearing their ugly heads.

1. I see the Law used mostly to encourage desired churchmanship conduct and as the Christian's ethical guide ("the third use" we call it). Dr. Caemmerer would periodically warn against "vegetable" sermons ("lettuce do this . . . lettuce do that"). The Law's function is neither "how to" nor "ought to." It is rather: "Take a look at you, you God-hater!" Obviously, the Law provides a fine code for Christian conduct. But we must understand that the Law's job is to kill and destroy, not to encourage and instruct. Excuse me, but if we really understood this (and preached accordingly), our children would not think that the Fourth Commandment is saying: "C'mon now, kids. Do a better job of loving-obeying-and-so-on Mom and Dad, and you'll live to a ripe old age." They would understand that it really means: "Love-obey-and-so-on your parents or go to hell." It doesn't say to the graying mama: "Buck up! Try not to worry about your boy in Vietnam." It says instead: "If you don't trust God, if you worry, the hell with you!" That was the Law, not me, speaking. It's that brutal.

2. The second abuse is related. It has somehow come about that while we are apparently quite aware that the Law says "Go to hell" to whores and communists, we are almost unaware of the fact that it says the

same thing to sweet Christian grandmas and "innocent" little children. When Luther ultimately recognized that he couldn't love (indeed, had to hate) the God of the Law, the stage for his resurrection (and the Reformation) was set. Since the Law is always retributive, the God we perceive through that Law (the "hidden God") must be hated, not loved, for through the Law He holds the carrot at our nose and the stick at our tail. One is thus doomed forever to try either to "love" God in order to avoid the stick (i. e., hell) or to get the carrot (heaven). In either case, he is not loving God; he is fearing the stick or loving the carrot. That's idolatry, and idolaters go to hell. The Christian preacher obviously must confront such idolaters with the judgment of God, or there can be no resurrection.

It is here that I see a great irony. Prostitutes and publicans generally have tasted so much Law in their life situations that often very little oral Law-proclamation is needed to bring about their death. Yet it is that kind of Law-proclamation (still dwarfed, however, by "lettuce" stuff) that thunders from our pulpits aplenty. And Satan laughs. How easily he can keep Mrs. Schmidt, the nice respectable housewife, from identifying herself with the prostitute. Indeed, he finds it ironically simple to turn such judgment into compliment . . . and Mrs. Schmidt's pharisaical roots sink down another foot or two. While adultery is a temptation for a Christian, morality as a means to God's favor is often a greater one. The preacher's Law-task is to destroy sinners. Open sinners are clay pigeons, but our task is to make the "righteous" into sinners, so that they can have death and resurrection. To be sure, go ahead and preach about adultery to all the nice Mrs. Schmidts. But if you don't get it across to them that they are cut from the same idolatrous cloth as the whore, you haven't hit the target.

B. I've talked much about the lively Gos-



pel-Word, the source of resurrection in Christ. I would simply add that if we've killed sinners with the Law, the Gospel will always be delightfully shocking. That's the way it is when dead people rise again. But let it be *proclamation*, not a doctrinal review concerning Christology or soteriology. Raise them from their graves and set them free. Attach no strings or conditions to that proclamation. The grace of our God is neither costly nor cheap; it has no price. It is free, and it frees.

Incidentally, "true" as I believe the Law/Gospel principle for preaching to be, I believe it even more essential that the preacher personally lives his own life under that dual Word, and not just for his sake (which should be obvious!) but also for the sake of the sheep he shepherds. I have another fear here. I am afraid both clergy and laity in the church today are becoming increasingly shy of honest repentance. Try to re-install the Sacrament of Absolution, and you'll see what I mean. We want to hide our sin, not realizing that then sin really has *us* to *itself*, instead of vice versa. Real word of judgment is thus usually received as an insult instead of sinner-killer. Peale's saccharine philosophy replaces the killer-Law, and so the Gospel becomes the "same old thing," both to us and, through us, to our

flock. Only by sticking our own lives constantly under that dual Word can we avoid a barren pulpit. In keeping with a healthy doctrine of the church, I have found that a Christian brother can do a much better job of placing my conduct under this dual Word for me than I can myself.

#### CONCLUSION

Looking back over these "current observations," I notice that they sound rather like very strong convictions. They probably are. I suppose my present openness and flexibility stem from the obvious homiletical implications of Walther's third *Law and Gospel* thesis: that the Law/Gospel proclaimer is always in a state of becoming, not arriving. It's very hard to let the deadly and lively Word loose every once in a while, let alone consistently. That is why I can say, with no attempt at all of sounding humble, that it takes almost more courage than I have to state those "great principles" in the essay and then attach a couple of my own sermons to it as examples. But I will say this: the preaching of the Gospel has become my greatest joy and my greatest burden. I hope at least some of the thoughts I have shared add something to your burden and your joy, "that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound!"

#### SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper, 1954. English translation. Cf. especially Chapter V.

Caemmerer, R. R. *Preaching for the Church*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959. Cf. especially Section 1.

Elert, Werner. *Law and Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967. English translation.

Elert, Werner. *Structure of Lutheranism*, I. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962. English translation. Cf. especially pp. 3—200.

Schultz, Robert C. "Justification in the 16th

and 20th Centuries," *The Cresset* (October 1957), pp. 6—13.

Walther, C. F. W. *Law and Gospel*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1897. German edition. (Note: Walther's 25 Law/Gospel theses were commented on by the Valparaiso University theology department in a special *Cresset* article, March 1962. This is a most helpful article.)

Wingren, Gustav. *The Living Word*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960. English translation.

MACK GOEGLIN



## TRINITY XIV

LUKE 17:11-19

## "BEING THANKFUL IS DIFFICULT"

*Introduction:* Man finds himself in quite a jam by virtue of the fact that he is not an animal. Being able to reason, analyze, evaluate, he ends up almost always with semidivine, very noble goals without the ability to achieve them. I'm sure that we can serve as our own best examples. We have probably known for a long time, for example, that there really is no question about our preference for love over against hatred; at least not if we've experienced both in our lives. We would like to love; to love well; to love all the time; to love everyone. Hatred and vengeance, we know, may bring immediate satisfaction, but they never last. They are always followed by bitterness, guilt, fear, alienation. On the other hand, love is more lasting and affords the lover much more warmth and joy. He gets a whole new outlook. So obviously there is no choice. We want love, but hate keeps on ruining things.

It is much the same with thanksgiving, the subject today's Gospel leads us to consider. I don't have to tell you that here too there is no real choice between thankfulness and unthankfulness (again, if we've tasted both). Happiness and thankfulness are inseparables. You can't have one without the other. And as we have sadly learned, frustration, gloom, and discontent also go together, equally inseparably with unthankfulness. Thus there is no choice. We all want to be thankful all the time and in every situation. Yet it is quite obvious that frustration and discontent continue to corrupt our lives.

I might note here that today's Gospel not only directs us to think about thanks; it itself is one of the portions of Scripture that most helpfully deals with the subject. Ten lepers taste the healing goodness of God in Christ. One is thankful; nine are unthankful. We need very much to find out what makes people (them and us) like that. It is

to be hoped that God will get some thanks out of it all.

## I

To begin with, we have to understand that, like love, thankfulness is basically an attitude (a condition within a person), not just an act. If one *is* thankful, he gives thanks, that is, he acts thankfully. I continue to see a strong parallel here between love and thankfulness.

So, for example, a loving man loves as a matter of course. He does not plan it or plot it. Love is spontaneous. It is its nature to interrupt schedules and goof up plans. It's hard even to work at being loving. You love if you're loving.

An unloving man, however, will probably want to love; try to love; deceive himself into thinking he does love; even do acts that look like love. But he really can't love. And if the reasons and motives behind his love acts are taken apart and revealed, he himself is revealed for the liar and hater he is.

Likewise a thankful man gives thanks. Not because he was "trained right" and has good manners—indeed, he may not have such a heritage; he may not know the nicest, most acceptable ways of thanking—but he gives honest thanks because he is thankful. He doesn't really have a choice in the matter.

An unthankful person, on the other hand, may and probably will want to be thankful very much. He is thankful to be thankful. If he's ever been that way, he knows it's the best way to be. So he will, perhaps, try to be thankful. He may be a whiz at saying "Thanks" in ten lovely ways and in ten different languages. But he can't give honest thanks, because he is not thankful.

It is important to keep this in mind when we consider the ten lepers. The one gave thanks because he was thankful. The problem the other nine had was not that they didn't say, "Thank You, Jesus." Do you really think for a moment, had the Lord



called after them, "Aren't you forgetting something?" that they would have responded: "No, we didn't forget anything, Jesus. You see, we're not thankful. Now we are going to run off to the priest to get readmitted to society, and we're not going to thank him either." Of course not. Like all decently raised people (assuming they weren't leper outcasts from childhood) they would have responded on cue: "O Lord, how could we have been so thoughtless and forgetful? Forgive us, we were just too excited. How thankless we must appear to be! Thank You so much. You're wonderful! We can never repay You for Your kindness! You've a heart of gold!" And so on and so on. Perhaps even dragging that biggest lie of all out of their repertory: "You shouldn't really have done it!"

No, their problem was not bad manners, forgetfulness, or excitement. Their problem was that they weren't thankful. And any words they might have forgotten (or remembered, for that matter) didn't and couldn't matter a bit.

## II

We also have to understand that precisely because thankfulness is basically an attitude, the least successful way of getting a person to be thankful is to tell him: "C'mon, now. Be thankful!" We may help people acquire the habit of saying thank words so that they look more thankful, but such "thankfulness" is superficial and unreal, and we surely don't need any more of that kind of stuff in our world. I imagine there are various reasons why simple encouragement does not bring about thankfulness, but one, I feel, is fairly obvious. If a person isn't thankful and wants to be thankful, he will already be anxious about his unthankfulness. Someone else telling him to be thankful, then, will only add to the anxiety. People bound up with anxiety over their own problems obviously will have difficulty being either loving or thankful.

Love, again, can serve us as a good parallel

example. One of the current songs that I like very much these days is "What the World Needs Now Is Love, Sweet Love." Not only do I like its melody; I feel the words are very pertinent and very true. I hum or sing it a lot (for which, incidentally, my family is not very "thankful"). Yet, if we could get everyone on earth to sing this song dozens of times each day, it probably wouldn't matter. There would still be a Vietnam, hatred and fear between races and classes of people, crime, divorce, estrangement, and the generation gap. No one should know the truth of this better than those of us who are parents. How successful are you in forcing your children to kiss and make up? We can make those acts happen — and probably do so — but they won't love each other again until they are loving. Indeed, I wonder how many vengeance plots have been laid in the little (and big) heads of people whose tongues were pushing out "I'm sorry" through gritted teeth. How silly! As though commands to love and loving words make a person love.

Again, the parallel is perfect. Try it out. Choose a time when you're quite low, very frustrated, and discontented. Then have someone you know tell you: "Cheer up! Be thankful! Count your blessings!" Since you've probably been trained as nicely as I, you would probably say something like, "Wonderful! Thanks so much. You've made my day!" But you would probably be thinking, "Big deal! Be thankful? For what?"

## III

But there's still more. We must go deeper still. We must understand well the other side of the thankfulness coin. It is obvious that the opposite of thankfulness is unthankfulness. Yet that statement is neither helpful nor enlightening. So we must build on that. We have already noted that along with unthankfulness are always found things like frustration and discontent. Now we ask:



"Why is the unthankful person afflicted with frustration and discontent?" The answer is, whether we like it or not, "Because he is greedy." I realize we are prone to think of greed in terms of corrupt, fat, political bosses gobbling up the little people in their domain (sort of the way Marxists look at capitalists), but let's consider greed more personally for a moment, as part of the universal human dilemma.

The youngster, for example, thanking Grandpa for one goodie already received, while trying to see what goodie is in Grandpa's other hand, is completely negating his "thanks" with his greed—even if Grandpa thinks it's cute. One cannot be simultaneously greedy and thankful. They cancel out each other. Indeed, we parents frequently discover, to our embarrassment and horror, that even our excellent training is prone to go out the window if Grandpa makes the tragic mistake of bringing Junior a pair of socks instead of the Super Plastic Thing-Making Set he was expecting. And permit me at this point to reassure the children that I am not just picking on them. I really think you're beautiful. Not because you're innocent (you're as greedy as I am) but because you're really real; you've not learned as yet how to be terribly greedy inside while, on the outside, you're convincing people you're wonderfully thankful. In other words, when you get older and wiser and more subtle like us, you won't "look" so self-centered and greedy anymore.

#### IV

The point is, of course, that the nine lepers were unthankful (as we are when we are unthankful) because they were greedy, not because of any words they did or did not say. Having received one goodie from Grandpa, they were hurrying off to get another. They had their eyes already on what was in his other hand. I'm sure that after tasting both goodies they would be satisfied temporarily and would no doubt hurry back to look

Jesus up and say, "Thanks." But that really wouldn't matter, would it?

Or we might state it slightly differently. Prior to their healing, the lepers had called out: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" But what they really meant as they said those words was: "Jesus, almighty and useful Tool, we need Your power for a while." How can I know this? Simple. They weren't thankful, so that had to have been their attitude. And there you have it—the ugly evil called greed and covetousness. St. Paul was at his insightful best when, talking about covetousness, he parenthetically remarked: ". . . which is idolatry." And we all surely know that no idolater can have any part of the kingdom of God. That is why we would be the world's biggest fools if we candy-coated our greed to hide it from ourselves. God will not only be not mocked, He will also not be used.

#### V

Now, for people like us who want to be thankful, this all must have sounded a bit hopeless. Perhaps. At least I hope it will help us be honest with ourselves and stop playing thank-you games with God. Yet we must remember the thankful leper. Remember him well. Remember how the merciful healing of God stopped him cold in his tracks. We know why the others kept going; it is just as important to know why the one turned back and fell on his face at Jesus' feet. So please learn this, and learn this well: *Nothing* makes thankfulness like the love of God. So if you made an honest confession before (and you do believe God's people have the authority on earth to forgive sins), you were not only absolved, you were also made thankful. Remember?

" . . . 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 Ghost."

Incidentally, you've surely tasted this kind of thing in purely human relationships be-



fore. You know—the bitter family squabble, with bitterness and anger and separation filling the house. Then one is courageous enough to start healing, and finally, probably with tears of both remorse and deep joy, all are in the others' arms. Well, if that's ever happened to you (and I hope it has), you know well that more than reconciliation has happened. Thankfulness has happened as well. This happens not accidentally, by the way. This is a "bit of God" rubbed off on man despite his rebellion. The important thing is that we understand that this is the essential task we have within the Christian community or family. We have to destroy our greedy thanklessness with the healing and reconciliation of our God. This is why one Christian, like me, has to say to other Christians, like you (and vice versa), things like:

Take a look at your Christ, filled up with your greed—and taking it all down into death with Him.

or

God, we know our greed. We hate it and renounce it. But we also know You, because we know the Son You've given us. And we're glad. And we're thankful.

or even

Hey! Look what kind of love the Father has given even greedy people like us—that we should be called children of God—and *so we are!*

We give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good, and His mercy endures forever. Amen.

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CHRISTMAS EVE  
MIDNIGHT EUCHARIST

JOHN 1:14

Tonight I feel confronted by a special dilemma: how to be happy about the general joy and happiness that comes to our society this time each year, without being content with that general joy—or appearing to be content. You see, I have very little sym-

pathy for those Christians who sit about in anguish each Christmas, wishing the "world" would leave their Christmas alone (or if they won't, the least they could do would be to "act Christian" for a few days!). I prefer to see this general Christmas joy as some kind of evidence that the image of man's Creator is still at times discernible in His creation, albeit much distorted, and that man wants to love and care for his brother (perhaps even his enemy-brother?) and is much disturbed by his usual self-obsession and fears, which prevent and hamper such caring. So, when there's a bit of a breakthrough at Christmas or any other time, I say, "Hooray!" And for that pagan "Scrooge" neighbor of yours who eases up a little with his family, employees, etc., I say, "Three cheers!"

But such general Christmas joy is not enough, is it? Not for the Christian community. The basic Christmas joy can never be general. Man can't really live on "general" things. A mother's or a husband's or a brother's love is nothing if not most specific. So a smiling "Merry Christmas!" is a nice general sentiment right now, but it is not adequate. Tonight we Christians want no superficial, general Christmas Gospel. We want to say a Christmas Gospel that is most real and specific, so that the angels' song might be real for us once more.

It would be interesting (though chaotic!) if all of a sudden each of us would rise up and begin to share really and honestly and openly that particular burden which seeks the hardest to rob us of our joy and peace. What fears, anxieties, guilt, and despair would be heard! Now of course we wouldn't do this (sad to say?), but if we did, I believe we would hear things like these:

"I fear for my health." I am aware of the advances of modern medicine. I am also aware that people still very much fear for their health and the health of their family. It is always interesting and touching to talk



to people who are in the hospital (as the phrase goes) "for tests." They're generally a bit embarrassed by the whole thing because they often aren't in much pain, as so many other patients are. But they know and I know that their apologies and embarrassment are not needed, for fear is as bad as or worse than pain, and it is a literally frightful thing to know that something is wrong with you but not to know what that something is.

I suppose tied in closely with such fear is the fear of death itself. Recently I read a most interesting little book, a classic piece of early German literature, entitled *The Bohemian Plowman*. It is a courtroom debate between Death and the Plowman, who had lost his beautiful, beloved wife in childbirth. The Plowman's arguments are angry, embittered, vengeful. It is noteworthy that Death's are not. Instead, his argument is calm and simple (in effect): "The trouble with you, Plowman, is that you've taken this thing *personally*. I was only doing my God-given job of weeding out the world so it can grow better." But that was specifically the Plowman's trouble—and ours as well. We have no choice; we must take death personally. It remains a monstrous threat to us and our loved ones. It remains a basic source of fear and anxiety.

Perhaps one of you would share the burden of being—or at least feeling—like the Born Loser. Not long ago I recall one of you coming to a church committee meeting after an apparently long and hard and not-too-successful day. You proposed something to the committee and were immediately overwhelmed from all sides with protest and disagreement. At that point you made the humorous and profound statement: "Hmph! I spent the whole day losing at the plant. I thought it might change tonight." We all laughed, but not too loudly, for surely we had all shared his feelings. Indeed it can be devastating in our family circles. The

husband who may have lost all day at work comes home to win—to win over a wife who's done a lot of losing, too, and who likewise wants to win for a change. That kind of thing is a horrible burden designed to make any Christmas empty of joy and warmth. How odd! A husband seeking to defeat the wife whom he loves! But bigger family fears exist.

Some of you are fighting for your marital life. . . . Some of you will be, but can't or won't recognize it as yet. . . . Some of you have already lost.

Or one of you may well have raised a son or a daughter as your heart's delight, the apple of your eye, only now to be rejected—you, your ways, your heritage, your value system, everything!

Or perhaps someone is in the process of losing a very dear friend, not knowing why, and feeling powerless to be able to stop it.

And I would guess that there are some, perhaps many, here tonight who live in the dread of having some secret sin revealed (possibly committed long ago) that could still kill, destroy, and bind in shame.

And if all these fortunately miss you, then there is always the burden aspect of the calling, which we all bear as the Lord's disciples—

the burden of wanting with the rest of humanity to call the shots of our love, of saying when and where and whom and how we shall love, but knowing we cannot;

the burden of wanting to love our God and our brother just once freely for their sake, not ours;

the terrible burden of purposely placing our good and loving acts under the judgment of God as well as our bad and selfish acts, that we may never use our goodness against God; the very painful burden of letting loose each day our all-important life, that God might give us again his own new and good life in his Son.

Now these kinds of things a smiling "Merry Christmas!" alters very little, and some of



you may well be asking this Christmas with fearful or saddened hearts: "Wherein lies our Merry Christmas and Happy New Year this year?"

To answer that, I would ask another question: Do you remember the text's words?

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father.

And just what, one may ask, is so great about those words, especially when said to people who have big guilt and fears and anxieties? Well, at the very least they provide a most shocking insight into the glory of God. Ordinarily when we think of "God's glory," we are probably more prone to think of some really spectacular things—hardly about some birth in a barn. If, for example, we're Old Testament buffs, we can surely come up with some more impressive examples of divine glory than Bethlehem. We could remember Moses and the burning bush; or better yet, Moses and the parting of the Red Sea. Perhaps best of all as far as glory is concerned would be the shining face of Moses that almost blinded the Israelites whenever he came down from Mount Sinai following one of his conversations with God. Remember that poor Moses had to cover his face during each of these episodes, so brightly did his face shine. How's that for a glory story? Or if we're really keen on spectaculars, what about the lightning display that burned up the good altar at the famous Jahweh vs. Baal contest long, long ago. Surely this is glory stuff: the majesty, honor, power, wisdom, justice, and so on and so on of God displayed for all to see.

"Oh," the harried pastor might think, "if we only had that kind of 'glory of God' available to us today! Could we pack them in! What church attendance! What building programs! What evangelical stewardship campaigns with fantastic per-communicant averages! Glory be!" And the poor

man has an idea there, doesn't he? If God would simply flex His almighty muscles for His church's sake, how easy our "mission" would be, wouldn't it?

But St. John says: "Nope, you're missing it. Those things may all have been glorious, but God's great glory was not seen in them. *The* great glory of God was shown to man when 'the Word of God was made flesh and dwelt in our midst, full of grace and truth.'" What is more, the New Testament rather painstakingly emphasizes the Lord's *humanity* throughout, generally accompanying even the Lord's miracle accounts with things like "and He hid Himself from the crowd" or "Now don't tell anyone about this!" People kept after Him, trying to get Him to show some glorious signs from heaven, but He refused to be spectacular for them. With His miracles He was saying, "I care about you!" not, "See how glorious God and I are!"

This is, admittedly, at first quite difficult to understand; that is, that God's glory is seen best not in His majesty, strength, and so on, for that is the way we would operate, all of us. But not the Lord Christ, not God. With Him it's almost just the opposite. According to His Gospel, if you would see the glory of God at its greatest, don't look for De Mille-style spectaculars or heavenly visions. Look instead to a very unspectacular crib and be shocked by the total humanity of this Word of God "without whom was not anything made that was made." Small wonder that no one "can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit!" This is completely alien to our way of thinking and doing. Indeed, one might suggest that it is downright insulting to man's intelligence (which accusation, incidentally, Luther agreed to heartily).

Yet Christianity has no validity whatsoever if this is not true: to really see the glory of the almighty God, one must stand at the crib of His infant, human Son.

Or one must watch Him as a grown-up doing things that gloriously decent people



would not think of doing—eating with ugly, brazen sinners; receiving, accepting, and forgiving whores; mingling with the diseased and outcast to heal and bless them; pursuing social rejects to woo and win them with His mercy.

Or to see God in all his glory, one must see this Son of God weep for a bereaved family, making their hurt His hurt; or weep for a city He loved that would not have Him.

Yet ultimately to see God in all His glory, one must move from crib to cross, there to see His Son submit Himself to a death He hated and feared because of His and His Father's inexplicable love for us. If John's words were ever right, they were right at the cross: "full of grace and truth." It is noteworthy and somewhat ironic that the three great glimpses of God's glory that came to man in Jesus Christ (the crib, the cross, and the crypt) could not begin to come close to the majestic grandeur of the parting of the Red Sea or the Lord's own miracle of feeding the 5,000. In fact the crib and the cross in no way even resembled divine miracles (though,

indeed, they were!), and the miracle of the empty crypt was seen by no one. Only its results were seen.

So, irrational and insulting as all this might literally sound, it remains literally the "Gospel truth": The great glory of God is best seen not in His might but in His mercy through Jesus Christ. That's good news, that's Gospel! It's the stuff real life is made of. It's the stuff sons of God, brothers of this Jesus Christ, are made of.

It is the stuff that enables people like you and me, facing a new year that we know could hold anything for us, facing all kinds of guilt and anxieties from within and dangers and death from without, to say to one another: Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year—in and through Jesus Christ, God's Word-Made-Flesh!

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Fort Wayne, Ind. MACK GOEGLIN