

The Gift of God

By Martin Luther (1483-1546)

JOHN 3-16

Martin Luther was the Apostle of the Sixteenth century—the master-mind and giant-father of the Reformation, under God. His mission was to re-open the way for God’s saving grace to flow freely to men—to re-awaken mankind to the sanctity of personal conscience. The papacy interposed itself between the human soul and the Almighty, till the words of Luther,—inspired by unquestioning faith in God’s declaration, “The just shall live by faith,”—fell upon it like huge sledge-hammer blows, crushing its impious assumptions into the dust. The life of this great reformer, which is an outline sketch of the Reformation, must be very briefly referred to here. Martin Luther was born the son of a miner, at Eisleben, in Saxony, November 10th, 1483. He graduated from the University at Erfurt, became doctor of philosophy, and in 1505 gave up the world to be a monk. He was made doctor of divinity in 1512. Five years later, in fulfillment of his vows as a defender of Holy Scripture, he attacked in ninety-five theses, the blasphemous sale of indulgences by Tetzel. As Pope Leo X sanctioned these practices, Europe was convulsed by a moral shock, and the Reformation began. Neither frowns nor flatteries could silence this bold minister of God. A grand pivot-scene of human history,—perhaps unequalled elsewhere by mortal,—was the firm stand of Luther before assembled monarchy and princes in the Diet at Worms, where he refused to retract in those sublime words: “Here I stand: I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen.” In 1522 the New Testament, and in 1534 the Old Testament, were translated by him into German. He died at Eisleben, February 18th, 1546. His works are published in twenty-seven volumes, and but few have been translated into English.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him, is not condemned: but he that believeth not, is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth, cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” —*John 3:16-21*.

THIS Gospel is one of the most precious passages in the whole New Testament, and fully deserves, if it could be done, to be written with golden letter into our hearts. Every Christian ought to learn this consoling text by heart, and should repeat it once at least each day, so that we would know these words well and could readily apply them for our consolation and the strengthening of our faith. They are words which have power to gladden us when we are sad and to bring us back to life when we are dead, if we but accept them earnestly in true faith. But inasmuch as it is impossible for us to comprehend fully and to express properly the contents of this glorious text, let us pray earnestly unto God to impress these words deeply upon our hearts through His Holy Spirit, so that they may become powerful in us, and may give us much joy and consolation, Amen.

The sum and substance of this glorious, comfortable, and blessed passage is this, that God loved the world so dearly that He gave His only begotten Son to save men from eternal death and to give them everlasting life. Christ our Lord speaks to us, as it were, in these words: Heed what I tell you of a peculiar, unheard-of-occurrence; yea, I will point you to a great, precious and valuable treasure, which is totally unlike any earthly gifts, by which you can now be rich and blessed for evermore. All the circumstances connected with the bestowal and reception of this precious gift are so peculiar and overwhelmingly grand that human thoughts cannot compass them, and much less can our words express their great importance.

If we consider first the Giver of this blessing, we find that the text says nothing of emperors, kings, or other dignitaries of the world, but it speaks of God himself, who is incomprehensible and omnipotent, who

has created everything through His Word, who has all and preserves all and is over all, compared with whom all creation, heaven and earth, with all they contain, is but as an insignificant grain of sand. He, the Almighty, is the great Giver of all blessings, and His gifts are so glorious that the most valued treasures of men, of emperors and kings, fade away into nothingness when compared with the mercies of God. Let us, therefore, rejoice greatly and sing for gladness in view of these blessings, and let us consider as mere trifles everything else that the world can bestow. What indeed can be greater or more glorious than the Almighty Himself!

This God, who is infinite and ineffable, manifests His loving-kindness in a degree beyond all measure. What He gives He gives not as something merited, or because it is His duty to give it, but simply, as our text says, through love. He is a Giver who begrudges not his gifts, but delights in bestowing them; He gives on account of endless, divine love, as Christ says: "For God so loved the world."

There is no other virtue so glorious as love. What we dearly love we are ready to defend and protect at the risk of our life. Patience, chastity, temperance, etc., are also praiseworthy virtues, but cannot be compared with love; she is queen over them all, and comprehends them all. Surely if one is pious and righteous, he will not defraud or injure his brother, but will assist him in everything; but if we love a person, we are ever ready to devote ourselves entirely to his welfare and to assist him, according as he has need, with our counsel and our possessions. Thus, as Christ declares in our text, does God also do toward us. He gives us blessings beyond measure, not because He is patient or because we are righteous and deserve it, but through love, the greatest of all virtues. In view of this fact our hearts should awake, all our sadness should vanish, for we see before us the inexhaustible love of the divine heart, which we ought to cherish in true faith as the greatest of all gifts, knowing that God is the highest and most glorious Giver of blessings unto us, and that they all proceed from the greatest of all virtues.

The fact that anything is given from true love makes the gift itself greater and more precious. If therefore we are convinced that love prompts the bestowal of any gift, we are well pleased; but when we doubt the existence of this motive in the giver, we care but little for his gift. Thus if God had given us only one eye or one foot and we were convinced that fatherly love prompted him to do this, we would be entirely content and better satisfied than we would otherwise be if we had a hundred eyes and a hundred feet.

But the words are plain: "God so loved the world." Therefore we ought to value highly, on account of His love, all His gifts, especially those which he has ordained to our salvation and the strengthening of our faith, as Holy Baptism, the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, etc. These gifts appear not brilliant before the world, yet unto us they are heaven itself, and make us glad and cheerful because they flow from the love of our Father toward us and are instituted for our benefit. Therefore Christ in this connection not only teaches us that God will give us something, but also in what manner he will do this, namely, through divine, Fatherly love.

Thus we see how great and ineffable are the Giver and the motive which prompts Him to grant us His blessings. But the gift itself is equally glorious and inexpressible. We hear from our text that God through love does not give us a dollar, a horse, a cow, an eye, a kingdom, or even the heavens with the sun and stars, nor the whole creation, but He gives us "His only begotten Son," who is like unto Himself in everything.

This gift must surely arouse within us the deepest emotions of happiness, so that our hearts will ever be glad and leap for joy. Even as the Giver, God himself, is endless and incomprehensible in His love, so the gift itself, His Son, is eternal and unspeakable. God in this gift bestows Himself with all that He is, as St. Paul says: "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). The victory over the devil, sin, death, and hell, as well as the gift of heaven, righteousness, and eternal life, is ours; yea all things are ours now, because we have the Son as our gift, in whom all else is comprehended.

If we then truly believe in this gift and accept it in real faith, all creation, be it good or evil, be it life or death, heaven or hell, must be at our service, as St. Paul in another place says: "For all things are yours;

whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (I Cor 3:21b -23). Indeed, if we fully consider this gift, we must confess and say that it is a boon which in value transcends all else in heaven and earth, and in comparison with which all treasures in the world are as a mite to a mountain of gold. But alas, our miserable unbelief and the terrible darkness which enshrouds us, as Christ himself shortly after this complains, prevent our hearts from realizing what a blessing we have in this gift of the Son of God; we hear these glorious words, but they rush by our outward ears, and the heart remains cold and cheerless. When we hear of a house or farm which is for sale on easy terms, we run and are as eager to make the purchase as if our existence depended upon it; but when the glorious Gospel is preached, that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son for its salvation, we are shamefully and sinfully careless and lazy about hearing and accepting this blessed truth. Who is at the bottom of this wicked indifference and carelessness as to the greatest gift, so that we do not accept it nor derive from it joy and consolation? No one but the old devil himself; he blinds our hearts to such a degree that we permit the preaching of this precious Gospel to go by unheeded, while we in the meanwhile busy ourselves with temporal cares.

For this reason I remarked, at the beginning of this sermon, that we ought to repeat these words when we get out of bed in the morning and again when we retire in the evening, so that we may know them right well and praise God for His unutterable blessings. For surely all, the Giver, His love, and the Gift bestowed so un-deservedly, simply through love, are most glorious and beyond our comprehension. The gift is one freely given, and will ever remain a gracious blessing which cannot be borrowed, lent, nor bought; all we have to do to obtain it is to hold out our hand and to receive willingly and gladly this treasure. Alas, that our hands and hearts are so reluctant and even unwilling to take such a glorious gift, which is so freely offered, and which is designed to be ours for evermore.

What shall those people be called who refuse to accept a kind gift and blessing? Suppose a poor, ragged beggar, nearly exhausted with hunger, meets with a great and charitable prince, who offers to give him a residence and a great yearly income, and to make him a lord, but that the beggar haughtily turns away from his benefactor without accepting his kindness, what would this foolish man be called by the world? Surely everybody would say that he is crazy and acts more like a brute than a human being. This would be the verdict of the world. Here, however, there is offered to the world no palace nor principality, no kingdom nor imperial domain, but the Son of God, and God himself urges the world to accept this gift; we turn our backs upon God, the kind Giver. From this we can judge what a great and horrible sin unbelief is, for it is not natural that men should refuse a gift and willingly turn from it.

This proves how mad and thoughtless the world is; she does not rejoice at this gift of God, and refuses to receive it when offered. No doubt she would be quick to stretch out her hands for it if it were a dollar or a new coat; but as it is the Son of God, every one acts as if the gift were valueless.

"The world" is mentioned by name in this connection as the ungrateful one who spurns this gift which is offered to her freely. For what has the world done to merit such love and mercy of God? Nothing at all. She is the devil's bride, the greatest enemy of God and the greatest blasphemer. Yet we read here: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."

My hearer, inscribe this truth deeply in your heart. And since you have now heard who God is, and what His gift is, which He gives alone through love, hear also what the world is. She is constituted of a multitude of people who do not believe in God and who make Him a liar; yea, they blaspheme His name and Word, and persecute it. Hence they are those who disobey father and mother, who are murderers, adulterers, treacherous persons, thieves, hypocrites, and the like, as we, alas, can see but too clearly every day of our life. The world is full of falsehood and blasphemy. Nevertheless God, through love, gives His Son to this bride of the devil, his greatest foe and persecutor.

This fact also magnifies the gift. God does not regard the sins and crimes of the world, nor her persecution of His name and Word, so as to withhold His gift on that account. It would seem as if God were too holy and His gift too precious to endure the perversion and wickedness of the world. But God does not

regard the sins of the world, whether they be against the first or against the second table of the law, as too great to permit the manifestation of his love toward her; yea, on account of her sins and great misery, in which we all would have to perish if God did not grant us His help, He is merciful, and prompted by His love, He comes to our assistance.

Ought we then not to love such a merciful God in return and to trust implicitly in Him who forgives sins, and will not suffer the ungrateful world to perish for her transgressions, which are innumerable? Yea, the sins of every one of us are innumerable; who then could enumerate the sins of the whole world? Yet we read that God is ready to forgive all our transgressions; for from the love of God comes the forgiveness of sins. We ought to consider this attentively. If God gives so much, yea even himself to the world, which is His natural enemy, we are forced to conclude that His mercy and grace will also manifest itself toward us, no matter what our experiences are during this life. Therefore we ought to trust in this love, and hope for every blessing from God for Christ's sake.

Such thoughts must encourage the heart and make it glad. I and many Christians have to confess that while we were in popery we lived in great wickedness and idolatry, and were guilty of many a sin. God however did not punish such wickedness as we deserved, but manifested His love by revealing again through the Gospel His Son, whom He had given to the world. We were again permitted to hear and to understand the glorious Gospel, proclaiming that God is not wroth with the world, but that He loves us and has given His Son in our behalf. Alas, we are ungrateful and do not realize this truth as we should, else would our hearts be filled with joy, and we would be determined not only to serve God right willingly, but also to suffer without complaint everything in His service, on account of the precious treasure which we have. It is our unbelief which prevents such joy and seeks the pleasures of the world, which come from the devil and are accursed.

We have now considered four parts in our text, namely, the Giver of the gift, the gift itself, how it is given, and to whom it is given. It is impossible to express fully in words the great importance of these four considerations.

Now follows the *causa finalis*, what purpose God has in view in the bestowal of this gift. It contains no outward advantages for us; we are neither clothed by it, nor fed, nor sheltered: much less is it injurious to our bodies; it contains no poison. Thus He gives His word, Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar, not to our injury but to our salvation. This gift of the only begotten Son is granted unto us to this end, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

From this declaration we learn that this gift does not bring us money, goods, honor, or power in this world, for all such benefits would be but transitory. Yea, if we had all these things we would nevertheless still be under the dominion of the devil. But now when the Son of God is given us, through the Father's love toward us, it follows that we are freed from sin, death, and hell, if we believe in the Saviour; for He crushed the head of the serpent and despoiled it of its power; He slew sin and devoured death and extinguished the fire of hell, so that they are all vanquished for evermore and deprived of their supremacy over us. So great and glorious was this gift. Honor, praise, and glory be unto God, the merciful Giver of this blessing, for ever and for ever, Amen.

Surely we have reason enough to feel happy at this occurrence, especially since Christ Himself asserts in our text that He was given us to overpower hell and to make our timid hearts bold and full of cheerfulness. Through the firm assurance that we have a reconciled God in heaven, who loves us and who through love gave His Son for us, so that we should not perish but have everlasting life, we are made glad; for we know that death has now no authority over us, and that eternal life is ours in Christ.

This truth we cannot learn or understand too well; therefore we ought to pray every day that God may through His Holy Spirit inscribe these words deeply in our hearts, that these may be illumined and enlivened thereby. Then will we become true theologians, who know Christ aright and adhere to His doctrine, prepared to suffer for this faith all ills and adversities which, in the providence of God, may visit us. But inasmuch as

we do not value these words as we should, and only hear them with our outward ears, they cannot prove their power in our hearts; we remain to-day as we were yesterday, and it is a sin and a shame that we see not with our eyes nor hear with our ears. Most certainly will the damned cry out on the day of judgment and lament, because they were so careless about the preaching and hearing of these words of consolation while yet on earth.

Let us now consider in what way this glorious gift ought to be received, in what receptacle this precious treasure should be securely laid and guarded. It is of great importance to know this. Christ himself points it out to us in the words: "That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This testimony is plain and clear. It declares that faith, that is, a firm confidence in the mercy and love of God in Christ, is the receptacle into which we should receive and in which we should keep the gift of the Son of God. Love and mercy prompt God to give us such a boon, while we can receive and retain it only through faith. No work or merit of ours avails us anything in this; for even our best works are worthless in this regard. We must stretch forth our hands in faith; and as God through love is the Giver, so we must through faith in Christ be the receivers of His gift. We must believe what our text tells us, that God is kind and merciful, and that He manifests His love toward us in sending His only begotten Son into our flesh and blood, to take upon himself our sins, as John the Baptist and the prophet Isaiah declare: "This is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world." With such a gift, and assured of the love of God, we can stay our hearts against the assaults of sin and the accusations of our conscience; for we knew that he is not wroth nor terrible, but that for Christ's sake he is kind and gracious unto us. Whoever believes this is truly happy and blessed, for this gift is so great and powerful that it crushes sin, death, and every evil. As a burning fire devours a little drop of water, thus are the sins of the whole world annihilated when they come in contact with Christ; yea, if we cling to Him in faith, our sins will be removed and destroyed, even as a straw is devoured in a mighty conflagration.

Christ Himself tells us in our Gospel: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The words "whosoever believeth in Him" are of especial importance here. Christ says nothing at all of good works as means unto salvation. Faith alone can and must receive this gift. Therefore we are undisturbed by the noise of our adversaries; we cling firmly to this doctrine, for here it is said; "Whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." If we doubt this, or change it, we accuse Christ of falsehood and set ourselves up as judges over Him.

What glorious words of consolation and eternal life! God grant that we may faithfully receive them into our hearts. Whoever has accepted them in faith will not fear the devil, nor sin, nor death, but will exclaim, in great joy and firm assurance; I am comforted, for I now have the Son of God given unto me through the Father's love toward the world. This I firmly believe, because the Word of God, the holy Gospel, thus declares it unto me. And Thy Word, O God, and Thy Son Jesus Christ cannot lie; this I know and believe. Wherein I am weak in faith, give me strength to receive and to retain this Thy great gift and love, else it will be of no advantage unto me. It behooves us therefore to become more and more acquainted with this gift and to be comforted by it; this however can only take place through faith, as Christ teaches us. The stronger our faith, the greater will be our happiness and safety, so that we can cheerfully do and suffer what God imposes upon us, and this because we know that he is merciful and full of love toward us.

Perhaps you will object and say: Yea, if I were as pious and holy as Peter, Paul, or the holy Virgin, then would I dare to believe and be comforted with this gift. They were saints, and no doubt for them this gift was intended, but I, a poor sinner, have no right to appropriate it unto myself for I have so often and in such manifold ways offended and opposed God. Such thoughts cannot be avoided when we hear this Gospel, and then think of our condition and great transgressions. But we must watch that these thoughts do not gain such power over us that we lose sight of the Gospel; to this we must speedily return and in this find comfort. Such thoughts are really nothing but unbelief, which would keep us from this gift and its comfortable assurance of the forgiveness of our sins through faith in Christ.

Unbelief, however, can be successfully combated only with the Word of God. Christ our Saviour gives unto us this Word, so that we dare not doubt its truthfulness. He tells us that His Father in heaven, the everlasting God, so loved "the world" that He even gave for it His only begotten Son. Now it is evident that the expression "the world" does not mean Mary, Peter, Paul, etc., but that it includes the whole human race, one and all, without any exception. Or have you any doubt that you are a human being? If so, feel your chest or your nose, and you will find out whether you are different from other people. Why then will you persistently exclude yourself from the application of this expression "world," when Christ so plainly includes in it all men, and does not apply it merely to the Virgin Mary, to St. Peter, or to St. Paul? If you and I refuse to accept Christ, because we think that we have no part in him, we make him a liar, for He said that He was given for the whole world. No, we must rather come to the opposite conclusion, that we have as good a right to this gift as Peter or Paul, or any one else has, simply because we are men, and as such a part of the world. Let us therefore beware and not doubt God's words by thinking that we cannot be sure whether we belong to those, to whom and for whom He gave His Son that they might have everlasting life. With such thoughts we deny that God speaks the truth.

Let us therefore shun such doubts, and the thoughts producing them, as we would shun the very devil himself. Let us be firm in faith and say: "We know that God gave His gift not only to Peter and Paul, for if he had desired to bestow it only upon those perfectly worthy of it, He would have given it to the holy angels, who are pure, undefiled spirits, or to the sun and moon, which obey perfectly the law of God by continuing in their prescribed course;" but we read otherwise, namely, that "God gave His Son unto the world." Therefore we all have a part in this glorious gift, just as well as David or any apostle. Who was David? Did he not commit gross sins? Who were the apostles? Were they not all sinners and unworthy of this gift?

Let no one, therefore, reason thus: "I am a sinner, and am not as holy as St. Peter, consequently I dare not appropriate this gift to my consolation." Far be it from us to harbor such thoughts. Let us believe in God's Word implicitly; and because He says that He gave this gift unto the world, let us all, since we belong to the world, no matter who we are, lay hold of it in faith; for if we do not, we deny the truthfulness of God, and thereby commit a great and damnable sin.

Some perhaps might think: "If God had told this unto me especially, I would believe it and be assured that it also applies to me." In this you err, my friend; God intentionally speaks in a general way, and says that He gave His Son unto the whole world, that all may be saved and none be excluded. If there are any who are not benefitted by this gift, they are themselves to blame; they exclude themselves, through wicked unbelief, from the blessing of the gift of God, and will have to render an account for their faithlessness; yea, their own words will condemn them.

This is a brief and simple explanation of our beautiful and precious text to-day, which is so comprehensive that it can never be exhausted. It contains the chief doctrine of salvation, that God, through love towards the wicked world, gave His only begotten Son to be its Saviour. Let every one learn what a glorious treasure and consolation the Christians have, who God is, and what the world is, and how through faith we can obtain and enjoy this mercy, as Christ says: "Whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." The doctrine concerning good works and their relation to faith cannot be considered in this connection, and will receive attention at some other time. Here we must consider what God gives unto us and how we ought to receive His gift.

Christ does not dwell here upon the duties which a Christian must fulfil to prove himself an obedient, beloved child of God, nor does he speak of the necessary gratitude for the love of God and the gift of eternal life. It suffices, therefore, if we in this connection restrict our consideration to the mercy of God, and to the truth that we are saved alone through this grace, which must be accepted in true faith, and with which good works on our part have nothing to do; for we are saved only through the love of God who gave His only begotten Son for us, for whose sake he now forgives us all our sins. God grant us his grace, that we may believe this truth and be happy in it in life and in death. We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.