

Jesu Juva

“Mercy Is Better”

Text: Luke 17:1-10 (Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:1-14)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, four young men in New Jersey went shopping. They needed batteries and cable for the stereo system in their dorm. They went to the store and found what they were looking for, but there wasn't anyone else there - no employees, no cashier. So after waiting a bit but no one coming out to help them, they left the money (including tax) for their purchase on the counter and left.

What happened, it turns out, was that the store was actually closed. The lock on the door had malfunctioned. But a store security camera recorded what they had done. The media caught wind of this and it became a story of no small renown and aired on both local and national news. These young men were brought onto shows as guests, applauded, and even given \$50 gift cards - just for being honest, just for doing what is right.

But it's not just these young men. When you give money back to a cashier because they gave you too much change, they're shocked. When celebrities or athletes choose not to sleep around but save themselves for marriage, jaws drop. When a husband or wife forgives their spouse instead of getting a divorce, they're regarded as heroic.

But not to Jesus. In fact, how different from all this are the words we heard from Jesus today: ***So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'***

When you do good, when you help others - *you've only done your duty.*

When you resist temptations to sin, to take revenge, to take what is not yours - *you've only done your duty.*

When you forgive those who sin against you, even up to seven times a day and more - *you've only done your duty.*

When you are faithful, kind, and compassionate - *you've only done your duty.*

If you keep all the commandments, from 1 to 10, in all their depth and breadth - *you've only done your duty.*

No TV appearance. No \$50 gift card. No lavish praise and applause deserved. *You've only done your duty.*

Doing all these things are what not only Christians, but all people, are to be doing all the time. It is how we were created, how we were wired, to be. But sin has short-circuited us, so that now instead of forgiveness and doing good being normal, *Girls Gone Wild, Men*

Behaving Badly, and Get What You Can While You Can are now expected.

And it's a trap you and I can fall into as well. Thinking that when we've done something good, when we've forgiven that person who sinned against us, when we've been generous with our time or money, when we had the opportunity to sin but didn't, that we deserve something for that. A little *quid pro quo* - if not from the world then at least from God. And are you disappointed when you don't see it coming? When you're not rewarded? When it seems as if God is gypping you and it's just not worth the effort?

Well, Jesus says, *what do you expect?* Does the servant who comes in from plowing or keeping the sheep expect his master to be so thankful that he did his duty that the master gets up and serves the servant?

Oh wait. That is what Jesus did! No, He does *even more*, for He does it for us who don't even do our duty. We come here, to the house of our Saviour, fresh from a week of failing to do good, of provoking others, of failing to forgive; a week of pride and selfishness and hurtful words; a week of, if not hurting others, then at least failing to help as much as we should; a week of failing to do our duty . . . and our Master, our Saviour, serves us unworthy servants. He removes our filthy, sinful rags, washes us clean from our sins, and dresses us with His righteousness. He speaks to us His Word, and He sets His food and drink, His Body and Blood, before us and says *come and eat*. I have prepared everything *for you*.

Is not this what we should marvel at? That we perhaps do not *shows the real danger of our wrong thinking*, when we think that we should be rewarded for doing good and that God owes us.

In that kind of thinking, everything starts with us. We do, we act, and then God responds. But that is the wrong order. That is completely upside down. For in reality, in truth, everything starts with God. He does, He acts, and we respond to Him. Without Him there is no world. Without Him there is no life. Without Him we have nothing.

And so the right way of thinking is that God acts, God speaks, in mercy and love and kindness, and we receive from Him. *Everything* undeserved. Or as we confess in the Creed (and as our catechism students are learning right now): *I believe that God has made me and all creatures, that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.*

This is right thinking. This gets the order right. And it is better. **Mercy is better.** If we get what we deserve, we get nothing. If we get what we deserve, we pat ourselves on the back. If we get what we deserve, then God is no Father, but simply an employer or a master. But if we receive mercy, we get all we need and more. If we receive mercy, we receive love. If we receive mercy, we have God as our Father, His Son as our Saviour, and His Spirit to live in us and guide us and help us.

Mercy is better. Sometimes we don't see it that way, thinking that mercy is only a last resort, the hope of the hopeless, the domain of the down and out. But that is what we are. Down and out sinners, deserving of death and condemnation, in need of mercy. *And we have a merciful God.*

And so we have come this day, we who have received mercy, and we confessed that we have not lived mercifully - we have not lived as receivers of mercy nor as givers of mercy. For to do our duty, all that God has commanded us, the Ten Commandments, is that not to show mercy and love to our neighbor? To do for them and give to them what our Father has given to us? *But I have not,* we repent and lament. And we plead: *Lord, have mercy.* And He does. He forgives, He speaks, He feeds, and He sends us back out with these gifts and His blessing and bids us be merciful to others. Not to give them what they deserve, but to be merciful. **For mercy is better.**

This is what Habakkuk was writing about. He looked around in his world in his day and saw *Girls Gone Wild* and *Men Behaving Badly* and asked God: **How long?** When are you going to judge all this and end all this? God didn't give him an answer, but instead replied: **the righteous shall live by his faith.** Faith that *receives* the mercy of God, *trusts* the mercy of God, and *gives* the mercy of God to others. Even when the world around us is falling apart. Or maybe especially then! Faith, Habakkuk. Mercy. **Mercy is better.**

This is also what Paul was writing about to Timothy when he talked about not being ashamed of the Gospel. Paul was a prisoner at the time, and was no doubt receiving no small amount of mocking. *This is how your God takes care of you, huh? This is how He rewards His "great missionary?"* But Paul knew of mercy, not rewards. He knew of the one who had mercifully come to him and changed him and turned his life around and gave him the opportunity to preach. So **I am not ashamed,** Paul said. Faith, Timothy. Mercy. **Mercy is better.** I know what has been mercifully promised to me on the Last Day. You too, Timothy.

And you too, people of God, loved by God, redeemed by the blood of God. Your God who hung on the cross **in mercy** for you, now sets himself on this altar **in mercy** for you and serves you. For mercy is better. That as unworthy servants mercifully declared righteous by Your Saviour, you live by this faith that *receives* the mercy of God and *gives* the mercy of God. And if your faith seems too small and weak and not up to it, that's okay. Even **faith as small as a mustard seed** is sufficient. Your Father will see to it that

you have what you need, and more. All that you need for both this life and the next. To do good and to forgive. To both live and die in His mercy and love.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.