

O God of Mercy, God of Might

Lutheran Service Book 852 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

“Deeds, not creeds!” Such has been the rallying cry for many Christians. A vibrant and full-bodied life of faith is the hope of such a cry. And, surely, the Christian life is one that is full of “deeds” that reflect a vital faith in the God of creation, redemption and sanctification, the blessed Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But an interest in “deeds,” the works of a faithful Christian, does not require driving a wedge between what is believed and how that belief is practiced. To the contrary,

living out the Christian faith receives its motivation and direction from the content of that faith — the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the promise of blessing from God now and into eternity.

That is the very hope expressed in this hymn, “O God of Mercy, God of Might.”

- Read James 1:22. How does James connect the content of faith with faithful actions? What “spin” does Paul put on the same truth in Rom. 2:13?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Reading for this day is part of Moses’ instruction to Israel as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land. Read Deut. 6:1–9.

- Why had Israel been kept from entering the Promised Land for 40 years? Read Deut. 5:32–33, the words that just precede the Old Testament Reading. What command and promise were given by Moses? How does Moses then express both the content and the practice of Israel’s faith in 6:1–9?

Read the Epistle lesson for the day, Heb. 9:11–14.

- In verse 11, what are the “good things” that have come through Christ? What was it that brought these “good things”? What comfort comes from having a purified conscience (v. 14)? What do you think are the “dead

works” the writer speaks of in verse 14? What flows out of a pure conscience?

Read today’s Gospel from Mark 12:28–37. The connection to the Old Testament Reading is clear. Jesus is showing its fulfillment in Him and the New Testament.

- What might have been the motivation for the question asked in verse 28? Given the response of the scribe in verses 32–33, what do you think Jesus meant by His statement in verse 34?
- Jesus indicates to His audience that all of this needs to be taken to another level of understanding. What is Jesus telling them in verses 35–37 that they must come to see? What had often been Israel’s problem in the Old Testament, a problem also common in Jesus’ day? Read Acts 7:51 and 2 Cor. 3:12–18.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

English clergyman Godfrey Thring (1823–1903) was the author of this hymn. The text was first included in the *Church of England Hymnbook* of 1880. It was located in the Offertory section, and Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan, was cited as the basis for the hymn.

Besides being a clergyman, Thring was also a wealthy landholder who throughout his life gave generously from his own considerable means to support churches and schools. This hymn was a reflection of his devotion to living out his Christian faith by doing good with the blessings the Lord had given him.

- Read James 2:17. What do good works reveal? Ideally, what should our actions reveal about us? Apply Jesus’ words in Matt. 6:19–20 to this principle.

Text

Throughout this hymn, the author examines the relationship between justification and sanctification. His concern for good works is not found in an inadequate view of righteousness but in a clear understanding and confession of a Christ-centered, Word-bound faith.

Carefully read stanzas 1 and 2 of the hymn.

- In stanza 1, where is the strength gotten to live for God? Read 1 Cor. 6:20. What was the price that was paid

for you (1 Peter 1:18–19)? How do you understand the meaning of glorifying God “in your body”?

- In stanza 2, how will this world be able to truly live? Read 2 Cor. 5:14–15. Through faith in Christ, for whom do we now live? In light of this, thinking back to today’s Gospel, what is the relationship between the first and second great (important) commandments (Mark 12:29–31)?

Now read stanzas 3 and 4 of the hymn.

- What did Jesus “feel” for those purchased by His blood (Luke 23:34)? How are we to feel toward those same blood-bought souls, and how will that be revealed in us? The Parable of the Good Samaritan was the inspiration for this hymn. Revisit that parable in Luke 10:25–37. How does the Samaritan reflect the saving love of Christ? What is the lesson for you (v. 37)?

Making the Connection

Certainly, it goes without saying that having faith in Christ impacts the way we live. Being loved by God and saved by Him through faith in Jesus Christ is what constrains us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

- The *Book of Concord*, our Lutheran Confessions, serves us by teaching and confessing both the content of our faith and its proper application. Consider and discuss, as a group, the following quotation, attributed to Luther: “Faith and good works well agree and fit together; but

In Closing

“Deeds, not creeds!” That byword has a certain ring to it, to be sure. But when graded against Holy Scripture and the Church’s long and faithful confession of biblical truth, it doesn’t pass the test! Deeds — good works — flow from faith in Jesus Christ and the love for God and neighbor to which that faith gives and sustains life. “Creeds lead to deeds,” or, perhaps better put, faith in Christ leads to works faithful to God’s Word and to the good of our neighbor.

- Describe the powerful mission emphasis in stanza 4 of the hymn. Why is mission work a great good work? What is always the only motivation for seeking the lost?

Conclude your study of the hymn now by reading stanzas 5 and 6.

- Read Gal. 6:2, along with stanza 5 of the hymn. What burdens are you called on to bear? Christian vocation also comes into the picture here. How do Paul’s words in Galatians and stanza 5 of the hymn relate to our God-given roles as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, etc.? The context is somewhat different, but how does Col. 3:23 help us understand stanza 5?
- How does stanza 6 of the hymn describe the work of the Holy Spirit? Recall Luther’s explanation in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 323). Of first importance, the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Christ through the Gospel. But what else does He do to enable us, as stanza 6 says, to “live in love”?

it is faith alone, without works, that lays hold of the blessing.’ [see LW 22:166] Yet it [faith] is never, ever, alone” (FC SD III 41).

- Our hymn is appointed for a Sunday very near the end of the Church Year. Describe why this hymn fits well at this point in the Church Year. Read Micah 6:8 and Matt. 25:40. Why are these texts appropriate summaries of the entire hymn, “O God of Mercy, God of Might”?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 852.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, cleanse us by the power of Your redeeming blood that in purity and peace we may worship and adore Your holy name; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 26B).