

FIFTH EVENING LECTURE

Page
36

It is a glorious and marvelous arrangement, passing comprehension, that God governs the kingdoms of this world, not by immediate action, but through the agency of men who — not to mention other things — are far too short-sighted and far too feeble for this task. But it is marvelous beyond comparison with this arrangement that even in His Kingdom of Grace, God performs the planting, administering, extending, and preserving of His kingdom, not in an immediate manner, but through men who are altogether unfit for this task. This is proof of a loving-kindness and condescension to men on the part of God and, besides, of a wisdom of His that no intellect of men can encompass or sound to its depth. For who can measure the greatness of God's love which is revealed in the fact that God desires not only to save this world of apostate men, but also to employ men from this very world, fellow-sinners, for this task? Who can compute the riches of the wisdom of God, who knows how to accomplish the work of saving men by the agency of other men who are quite unfit and unqualified for this work, and that He has hitherto gloriously pursued, and still is pursuing, this work?

Page
37

My dear friends, you are beholding in this arrangement a mighty reason, not only for humble wonder, but also for heartfelt joy and exultation; for in days to come God wants to make you instruments of His grace for this work. Stop and consider: If you could learn at this place how to prolong the life of those who will be entrusted to your care by fifty years or even to raise the dead to a new lease of life here in time, how great and glorious your calling would appear, not only to you, but to all men! In what great demand you would be! How you would be esteemed as extraordinary men! What a treasure men would think they had obtained if they had obtained you! And yet, all this would be as nothing compared with the sublimeness and glory of the calling for which you are to be trained here. You are not to prolong this poor, temporal life of those who will be entrusted to your care, but you are to bring to them the life that is the sum of all bliss, the life that is eternal, without end. You are not to raise those entrusted to your care from temporal death to live once more this poor temporal life, but you are to pluck them out of their spiritual and eternal death and usher them into heaven.

Oh, if you would seriously consider what a great honor God means to confer on you, you would go down on your knees every day, yea, every hour; you would prostrate yourselves in the dust and exclaim with the psalmist: "Lord, what is man that Thou takest knowledge of him, or the son of man, that Thou makest account of him!" Ps. 144, 3. At the same time you would receive an incentive from God's choice of you to surrender yourselves to the merciful God every day and every hour and say: "Lord, here I am with my body and soul and all my strength. I am willing to consume them all in Thy service." How glad and ready you would be to make every sacrifice in the interest of your calling and allow yourselves to be fashioned into tools of God!

However, the matter of primary importance to you is that before teaching others you first obtain a very thorough and vital knowledge yourselves of those things which God by His prophets and apostles has revealed for the salvation of men. Let us, then, cheerfully proceed in the consideration of our highly important subject.

To begin with, let me submit two testimonies from Johann Gerhard. True, he cannot speak of facts of experience with that divine rhetoric that was granted to Luther. However, Gerhard made a thorough study of Luther and gave a systematic presentation of Luther's teaching. In the chapter on the Gospel, § 55, he says: "The distinction between the Law and the Gospel must be maintained at every point." Mark well — at every point. There is not a doctrine that does not call upon us rightly to divide Law and Gospel.

Page
38

Gerhard proceeds: "However, this distinction must be observed above all at two points: First, in the article of justification, which, owing to the corruption and weakness of our flesh, is in a certain way, though accidentally, incapacitated for this task. Rom. 8, 3." The Law does not belong in the doctrine of justification. That is a most important point. We cannot be saved by the Law; accordingly, God provides another means for us by which we can be saved.

Gerhard continues: “But our justification is from the Gospel, in which the righteousness that is valid in God’s sight is revealed without the Law, Rom. 3, 21; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, Rom. 1, 16.” All now depends on this other means which God has provided, on our accepting these tidings of great joy, the Gospel, and in it the doctrine of justification, without which the Bible would sink to the level of any other book of morals.

To return to Gerhard: “For this reason men should be exhorted, yea, urged to perform good works according to the norm of the Law. These works, however, must not be brought into the august place where our justification in the sight of God occurs. For at that point there is a ceaseless conflict between man’s doing and his believing, between God’s grace and man’s works, between Law and Gospel.” Woe to us if, when about to expound the Gospel, we mingle the Law with it! That is what we are doing when, in expounding the Gospel, we say more than, “Accept this message!” Every addition would be Law. The Gospel demands nothing of us; it only says: “Come, eat and drink.” What it offers to us is the Great Supper. Here is where most preachers make their mistake. They are afraid that by preaching the Gospel too clearly they will be the fault if people lapse into sin. They imagine that the Gospel is food for the carnal-minded. True, to many the Gospel becomes a savor of death unto death, but that is not the fault of the Gospel. That happens only because men do not accept, do not believe, the Gospel. Faith is not the mere thought “I believe.” My whole heart must have become seized by the Gospel and have come to rest in it. When that happens, I am transformed and cannot but love and serve God. Most urgent admonitions must indeed be administered to men, even after they have become believers, but these admonitions must not be brought into the solemn meeting where God justifies the sinner. The Law must first discharge its functions in order that those who hear it may accept the Gospel with a hungering and thirsting soul and drink their fill of it. As soon as a person has become a poor sinner, as soon as he is aware of the fact that he cannot be saved by his own effort, even before a spark of love has been kindled in him, Christ says: “There is My man! Come to Me just as thou art. I will help thee; I will take from thee the burden that oppresses thee, and what I shall lay on thee is a light burden and an easy yoke.” The principal thing that I have to tell a person when explaining to him how he can become righteous is that I announce to him the free grace of God, concealing nothing, saying none other things to him than what God says in the Gospel. A hedge must be made around Mount Sinai, but not around Golgotha. At the latter place all wrath of God has been appeased.

Now, the Lord has given two keys to the Church and, through the Church, to all ministers: the binding and the releasing key. The binding key locks heaven; the releasing key opens it. These two wonderful keys the preacher holds in his hand; for the Church gave them to him when it conferred on him the office of the ministry.

Continuing, Gerhard tells us that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel must be observed, “secondly, in using the keys of the Church. Forgiveness of sin must not be proclaimed to impenitent and secure sinners.” That would be an abominable commingling of Law and Gospel. That would be like stuffing food into the mouth of a person who is already filled to the point of vomiting. What must be announced to such a person, Gerhard says, is “rather the wrath of God from the Law. Rom. 2, 9: ‘Tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil.’ 1 Tim. 1, 9: ‘The Law is ... made ... for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly,’ whom it crushes with the weight of its damning accusations. To contrite hearts not the threats of the Law, but the oil of evangelical consolation must be administered. Is. 66, 1, 2: ‘Where is the place of My rest? ... To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at My Word.’ Matt. 11, 5: ‘The poor have the Gospel preached to them.’ ” When I know that a person is not in a condition to have the Gospel preached to him, I must not proclaim it to him. However, when I speak in public, the situation is different. There I must take into consideration chiefly the elect children of God. Still I must preach the Law even there. A sermon that does not contain any Law is worthless. In every gathering of people there are always impenitent persons, who must be roused from their sleep of sin and terrified. — Any one who, on being admonished, promptly says: “Ah, bosh! that does not concern me,” shows that his heart has not yet been crushed.

In another place in the same chapter, § 52, Gerhard writes: “There are several reasons why this distinction between the Law and the Gospel must be accurately defined and strictly adhered to. In the first place, many instances from the history of the Church of days gone by might be adduced to show that the pure teaching of the article of justification is not preserved, and absolutely cannot be preserved, if the distinction of these two doctrines is neglected.” Woe to him who injects poison into the doctrine of justification! He poisons the well which God has dug for man’s salvation. Whoever takes this doctrine away from man robs him of everything; for he takes the very heart out of Christianity, which ceases to pulsate after this attack. The ladder for mounting up to heaven is taken away, and there is no longer any hope of saving men. “In the second place,” Gerhard continues, “when the doctrine of the Gospel is not separated from the Law by definite boundary-lines, the blessings of Christ are considerably obscured.” By ascribing to man some share in his own salvation, we rob Christ of all His glory. God has created us without our cooperation, and He wants to save us the same way. We are to thank Him for having created us with a hope of life everlasting. Even so He alone wants to save us. Woe to him who says that he must contribute something towards his own salvation! He deprives Christ of His entire merit. For Jesus is called the Savior, not a helper towards salvation, such as preachers are. Jesus has achieved our entire salvation. That is why we were so determined in our Predestinarian Controversy. For the basic element in the controversy has been that we insisted on keeping Law and Gospel separate, while our opponents mingle the one with the other. When they hear from us this statement: “Out of pure mercy, God has elected us to the praise of the glory of His grace; God vindicates for Himself exclusively the glory of saving us,” etc., they say: “That is a horrible doctrine! If that were true, God would be partial. No, He must have beheld something in men that prompted Him to elect this or that particular man. When He beheld something good in a person, He elected him.” If that were so, man would really be the principal cause of his salvation. In that case man could say, “Thank God, I have done my share towards being saved.” However, when we shall have arrived in our heavenly fatherland, this is what we shall say: “If I had my own way, I should never have found salvation; and even supposing I had found it by myself, I should have lost it again. Thou, O God, didst come and draw me to Thy Word, partly by tribulation, partly by anguish of heart, partly by sickness, etc. All these things Thou hast used as means to bring me into heaven, while I was always striving for perdition.” Yonder we shall see — and marvel — that there has not been an hour when God did not work in us to save us, and that there has not been an hour when we — wanted to be saved. Indeed, we are forced to say to God: “Thou alone hast redeemed me; Thou alone dost save me.” Verily, as sure as there is a living God in heaven, I cannot do anything towards my salvation. That is the point under discussion in this controversy.

In conclusion, Gerhard says: “In the third place, commingling Law and Gospel necessarily produces confusion of consciences because there is no true, reliable, and abiding comfort for consciences that have been alarmed and terrified if the gracious promises of the Gospel are falsified.” Commingling Law and Gospel brings about unrest of conscience. No matter how comforting the preaching is that people hear, it is of no help to them if there is a sting in it. The honey of the Gospel may at first taste good, but if a sting of the Law goes with it, everything is spoiled. My conscience cannot come to rest if I cannot say: “Nevertheless, according to His grace, God will receive me.” If the preacher says to me: “Come, for all things are now ready — provided you do this or that,” I am lost. For in that case I must ask myself, “Have I done as God desires?” and I shall find no help.