

SIXTH EVENING LECTURE

(October 23, 1884.)

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A godly Lutheran theologian of a former age, among other things, gives the following description of students of theology: “When they arrive at the university, they know everything. In their second year of study they become away of something that they do not know. At the close of their last year of study they are convinced that they know nothing at all.” We can easily see the lesson which the old theologian wished to convey, *viz.*, that there is no worse delusion than this, to think that one has advanced very far in the acquisition of knowledge and that the knowledge of one who is conceited because of what he knows surely is but very superficial. There is no doubt that what the old theologian said is quite right. It perfectly agrees with the statement of the apostle in 1 Cor. 8, 2: “If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.”

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Accordingly, all great pedagogs and teachers have warned their pupils, saying: *Non multa, sed multum* (Do not study many different things, but much of one thing). Everything depends, not on how much we know, but *how well* we know it. The greater the progress a person makes in his science, the more rapidly does he become convinced that he is still lacking many things. He does not adopt the slogan of our times: *Quantum est, quod scimus!* (Oh, how gloriously much we know!), but repeats the confession of the great philosopher: *Quantum est, quod nescimus!* (Alas, how great is our ignorance!). The more truly learned a person is, the humbler he is; for he knows how much he is still lacking, within what narrow boundaries his knowledge is confined, and how much there still remains unexplored.

Now, if this observation applies to every kind of knowledge, to every department of science, it applies with special emphasis to the domain of theology. Here is where the well-known saying of the Apostle Paul applies, which he uttered, not concerning genuine knowledge, but about the conceited knowledge to which I referred. Accordingly, Luther addresses this word of warning to every lazy student: “Study! *Attende lectioni!* [Keep on reading!] You cannot read to much in the Scriptures; for what you read you cannot to fully comprehend, what you understand you cannot teach to well, and what you are teaching well you cannot put into practise too well. *Experto crede Ruperto* [Believe Rupert, for he knows from experience].”

Every true understanding, every genuine knowledge in theology, is obtained with great difficulty. But the greatest difficulty occurs in the study of the doctrine which is discussed in these evening lectures. The third thesis, now before us, furnishes an excellent opportunity for making this point clear to us.

Thesis III.

Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience.

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Possibly some one among you is thinking, “Is this thesis really true? I have now heard five lectures on this subject, and it is perfectly clear to me. If this is the most difficult art, I know it.” But, my dear friend, you are greatly mistaken. Consider that the thesis does not mean that the doctrine of the Law and the Gospel is so difficult that it cannot be learned without the aid of the Holy Ghost. It is easy — easy enough for children to learn. Every child can comprehend this doctrine. It is contained in every catechism. It is not strong meat, but milk. It is the first letters of the alphabet, it belongs to the rudiments of Christianity; for without this doctrine no person can be a Christian. Even a small child soon learns these facts: “The First Part of the Catechism treats of the Ten Commandments, the Second Part of the Creed. We are first told what we are to do; next, that a person need only believe to be saved.” In other words, the child observes that the Second Part does not, like the First, make demands. This doctrine of the distinction of Law and Gospel is entirely different from the doctrine of the attributes by which the three persons in the Godhead are distinct from one another; or the doctrine of predestination with its many inscrutable mysteries, or the doctrine of the communication of the divine attributes

to the human nature of Christ. These doctrines exceed the grasp of children and cannot be comprehended by them. But the doctrine of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is different. You know it now. But at the present time we are studying th *application* and the *use* of this doctrine. The practical application of this doctrine presents difficulties which no man can surmount by reasonable reflections. The Holy Spirit must teach men this in the school of experience. The difficulties of mastering this art confront the minister, in the first place, in so far as he is a Christian; in the second place, in so far as he is a minister.

In the first place, then, th proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a difficult and high art to the minister in so far as he is a Christian. Indeed, the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel is the highest art which a person can learn.

We read Ps. 51, 10. 11: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.*

Here David prays God for a right (German: *gewiss*) spirit. After his horrible fall, the shedding of innocent blood and the sin of adultery, David had lost assurance of divine grace. Absolution was, indeed, pronounced to him when he had come to a penitent knowledge of his sin, but we do not hear that he forthwith became cheerful. On the contrary, many of his psalms plainly show that he was in very great misery and affliction. When the messenger of God approached him with the declaration: "The Lord hath put away thy sin," his heart sighed, "Ah, no! That is not possible; my sin has been too great." We behold him watering his couch with his tears, Ps. 6, 6, going about a bent and broken man, his body drying up like grass in the drought of summer. This exalted royal prophet knew th doctrine of th Law and the Gospel full well. All his psalms are full of references to the distinctions between the two. But when he fell into sin himself, he lacked th practical ability of applying his knowledge. He cried: "Renew a right spirit within me."

It is a characteristic of Christians to regard th Scriptures as the true, infallible Word of God. But when they are in need of comfort, they find none; they cry for mercy; they supplicate God on their knees. God made David taste the bitterness of sin. In general, we behold David after his fall more frequently in sadness than in joyful spirits, and we see that one misfortune after the other befalls him. God did not permit these misfortunes to afflict David because He had not forgiven his sin, but in order to keep him from falling into another sin. It was nothing but love and mercy that prompted God to act thus. Naturally, a person still dead in sin things: "Why was David so foolish as to torment his mind with a sin that had been forgiven by God?" A person reasoning thus makes of the Gospel a pillow for his carnal mind to rest on; he continues his sinful life and imagines that he will, after all, land in heaven. His Gospel is a gospel for the flesh.

Luke 5, 8 we have the cry of Peter: *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.* Is not this a remarkable incident? The Lord comes to the disciples whom He had named Petros, a rock-man, and bids him and his fellow-fishermen, after an unsuccessful night on the lake, to drop their nets in deep water. Peter complied, most likely expecting, however, that he would catch nothing. But, lo! they caught such a multitude of fishes that their nets broke. Now Peter is seized with fear. He reflects: "That must be the almighty God Himself who has spoken to me That must be my Maker. He will one day be my Judge!" He falls down at Jesus' knees and says: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." He expects the Lard to say to him: "Look at the multitude of sins thou hast committed. Thou art worthy of everlasting death and damnation." Whence, then, came Peter's fright? Why did he not thank Jesus when he fell down at His knees? Because his many sins passed before his mind's eye, and in that condition it was impossible for him to express cheerful gratitude, but had to drop trembling to his knees and cry to his Lord and Savior those awful words: "Depart from me, O Lord." The devil had robbed him of all comfort and whispered to him that he must speak thus to Jesus. He expected nothing else than to be slain by the Lord. He was incapable of distinguishing Law and Gospel. If he had been able to do this, he could have approached Jesus cheerfully, remembering that He had forgiven all his sins. Many a time in his later life he

probably said to himself: “Peter, you were a great simpleton on that occasion. Instead of what you did say to Jesus, you should have said: O Lord, abide with me, for I am a sinful man.” That is what he did on a later occasion when he had fallen into another sin. Then he was filled with joy unspeakable when Jesus gave him that look full of gracious compassion.

1 John 3, 19. 20 we read: *Hereby we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things.* When our heart does not condemn us, it is easy to distinguish Law and Gospel. That is the state of a Christian. But he may get into a condition where his heart condemns him. Do what he will, he cannot silence the accusing voice within. It calls to him again and again, reminding him of former sins. The recollection of some long-forgotten sin may suddenly start up in him, and he is seized with a terrible fright. Now, if in that moment a person can rightly divide Law and Gospel, he will fall at Jesus’ feet and take comfort in Jesus’ merit. That, however, is not easy. One who is spiritually dead regards it as foolish to torment himself with former sins. He becomes increasingly indifferent towards all sins. A Christian, however, feels his sin and also the witness of his conscience against him.

But in the end, after Christians have learned to make the proper practical use of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, they join St. John in saying: “God is greater than my heart; He has rendered a different verdict on men’s sinning, and that applies also to me.” Blessed are you if you have learned this difficult art. If you have learned it, do not imagine yourselves perfect. You will always be more than beginners in this art. Remember this: When the Law condemns you, then immediately lay hold upon the Gospel.

Since the days of the apostles there has not been a more glorious teacher of this art than Luther. Yet he confesses that in an effort to reduce his teaching to practice he was often defeated. In spite of the fact that he had led a decent life and was not guilty of gross sins, the devil often vexed him. He tormented him with the sins of his inner life. Nonplussed, Luther would often come to Bugenhagen, his confessor, with his worries and, kneeling, receive absolution, whereupon he would depart rejoicing.

Luther writes (St. L. Ed. IX, 806f.): “God has given us His Word in these two forms: the Law and the Gospel. The one is from Him as well as the other; and to both He has attached a distinct order: the Law is to require of every one perfect righteousness; the Gospel is to present gratis the righteousness demanded by the Law to those who have it not (that is, to all men). Now, then, whoever has not satisfied the demands of the Law and is captive under sin and the power of death, let him turn to the Gospel. Let him believe what is preached concerning Christ, *viz.*, that He is verily the precious Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, that He has reconciled man with His Father in heaven, and from pure grace, freely and for nothing, gives to all who believe this everlasting righteousness, everlasting life and bliss. Let him cling solely to this message; let him call upon Christ, beseeching Him for grace and forgiveness of sin; and since this great gift is obtained by faith alone, let him firmly believe the message, and he shall receive according as he believes.

“This is the proper distinction, and, verily, it is of the utmost importance that it be correctly perceived. O yes, we can readily make the distinctions in words and preach about it, *but to put it in to use and reduce it to practice, that is a high art and not easily attained.* Papists and fanatics do not understand it at all. I observe in my own case and that of others, who know how to talk about this distinction in the very best fashion, how difficult it is. To talk about the Law’s being a different word and doctrine from the Gospel, that is a common achievement, soon accomplished. But to apply the distinction in our practical experience and to make this art operative, that is labor and sorrow.”

Again, *Luther* writes (St. L. Ed. IX, 808f.): “This distinction must be observed all the more when the Law wants to force me to abandon Christ and His Gospel boon. In that emergency I must abandon the Law and say: Dear Law, if I have not done the works I should have done, do them yourself. I will not, for your sake, allow myself to be plagued to death, taken captive, and kept under your thralldom and thus forget the Gospel. Whether

I have sinned, done wrong, or failed in any duty, let that be your concern, O Law. Away with you and let my heart alone; I have no room for you in my heart. But if you require me to lead a godly life here on earth, that I shall gladly do. If, however, like a house-breaker, you want to climb in where you do not belong, causing me to lose what has been given me, I would rather not know you at all than abandon my gift.”

Like two hostile forces, Law and Gospel sometimes clash with each other in a person’s conscience. The Gospel says to him: “You have been received into God’s grace.” The Law says to him: “Do not believe it; for look at your past life. How many and grievous are your sins! Examine the thoughts and desires that you have harbored in your mind.” On an occasion like this it is difficult to divide Law and Gospel. When this happens to a person, he must say to the Law: “Away with you! Your demands have all been fully met, and you have nothing to demand of me. There is One who has paid my debt.” This difficulty does not occur to a person dead in his trespasses and sins; he is soon through with the Law. But the difficulty is quite real to a person who has been converted. He may run to the opposite extreme and come nigh to despair.

Luther says (St. L. Ed. IX, 802): “Place any person who is well versed in this art of dividing the Law from the Gospel at the head and call him a Doctor of Holy Writ; for without the Holy Ghost it is impossible to master this distinction. That is my personal experience; moreover, I observe in the case of other people how difficult it is to separate the teaching of the Law from that of the Gospel. The Holy Ghost is needed as Schoolmaster and Instructor in this task; otherwise no man on earth will be able to understand or learn it. That is the reason why no Pope, no false Christian, no fanatic, can divide these two from each other, especially *in causa materiali et in objecto*.” *Luther* means to say: It is not difficult to say what the contents of the Law and the Gospel are nor at what persons they are aiming. But it is difficult to say, on the one hand, whether this particular statement is part of the Law or of the Gospel, and, on the other hand, to whom in an individual case, the Law must be applied and to whom the Gospel. The greatest difficult is encountered with the theologians themselves.

In his Table Talk, *Luther* says (Walch, XXII, 65): “There is not a man on earth who knows how properly to divide the Law from the Gospel. When we hear about it in a sermon, we imagine that we know how to do it, but we are greatly mistaken. I imagined I understood it because during so long a time I had written a great deal about it; but believe me, when I come to a pinch, I perceive that I have widely missed the mark. Accordingly, God the Holy Ghost alone must be regarded as Master of, and instructor in, this art.” Mark this confession of *Luther*, the man who had written large tomes on this subject in many years. — Let me remark, in passing, that we are always more inclined to give ear to the Law than to the Gospel.

In his commentary on Ps. 131 (St. L. Ed. IV, 2077) *Luther* writes: “There are some who imagine that they understand these matters quite well; but I warn you to beware of such a presumptuous thought and to remember that you must remain pupils of the Word .Satan is such an accomplished juggler that he can easily abolish the difference and make the Law force itself into the place of the Gospel ,and *vice versa*. We often meet with people in their last agony who with a stricken conscience seize a few sayings which they suppose to be Gospel, while in reality they are Law, and thus forfeit the consolation of the Gospel; for instance, the statement in Matt. 19, 17: ‘If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments’; likewise this one in Matt. 7, 21: ‘Not every one that says unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.’ ” The devil approaches men who are in anquishe of death and in their last hour seeks to pluck them away from the Gospel. When Christians are departing into eternity, they reflect whether they are worthy. They may review a multitude of texts and hit upon one like this: “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.” Then their heart tells them: “You are not fit; you cannot be saved.” You see, they cannot distinguish between Law and Gospel. Therefore it is good for you to be taught this art while you are young. But you must not think: “I have been thoroughly grounded in this doctrine, and when I shall be in anguish of death, I shall simply cling to what I have been taught.” Ah, yes; if that were within our power! But the devil will throw you into such confusion that you will not find a way of escape out of your

dilemma. Nor must you think: “Oh, I am still young.” Does not God frequently snatch one away in the flower of his youth in order to impress upon others how necessary it is for everybody to consider that he, too, must die?

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Luther continues: “By tests like those cited the hearts of men are often led astray, so that they cannot think of anything except of what they have done and should have done; likewise, of what God commands and forbids. While keeping their minds on these things, they forget all that Christ has done and God has promised to do through Christ. Therefore no one should be so presumptuous as to imagine that he has attained to perfection in this matter.” You remember that the point we are discussing now is how a preacher, in as far as he is a Christian, is to divide Law and Gospel. For he must be a Christian, or else he ought not to be a preacher. Now, any one who fails to attain the knowledge of, and the practical ability to apply, this distinction is still a heathen or a Jew. The *forma* of a Christian, — that which makes a person a Christian — is that he knows how to seek salvation in Christ and thus to escape the Law.

I wish to cite *Luther* once more. He writes (St. L. Ed. IX, 161): “In your tribulations you will become aware that the Gospel is a rare guest in men’s consciences, while the Law is their daily and familiar companion. For man has by nature the knowledge of the Law.” Unless a person learns this by experience, he will not learn it at all. If you are Christians, you will admit that you are far oftener troubled and worried than comforted. When you feel the comfort of the Gospel in your heart, that is a glimpse of the light that may come to you on a certain day; but then several days may pass when you will not catch that glimpse again. Always keep this reflection present: “For such poor sinners as I am the Gospel — the sweet Gospel — has been provided. I have forgiveness of sins through Christ.”

Luther proceeds: “There is a time to die, and there is a time to live; there is a time for hearing the Law, and there is a time to be unconcerned about the Law; there is a time to hear the Gospel, and there is a time to be unconcerned about the Gospel. At this moment let the Law begone and let the Gospel come; for that is not the time to hear the Law, but th Gospel. However, how about this: You have not done any good; on the contrary, you have committed grievous sins? I admit that, but I have forgiveness of sins through Christ, for whose sake all my sins have been remitted. However, while the conscience is not engaged in this conflict, while you are obliged to discharge the ordinary functions of your office, at a time when you must act as a minister of the Word, a magistrate, a husband, a teacher, a pupil, etc., it is not in season to hear the Gospel, but the Law. At such a time you are to perform the duties of your profession.” etc.

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Accordingly, when you are called upon to do what is right in public, that is not the time to hear the Gospel, but th Law, and to remember your calling or profession. Whenever your relation to God is not under review, you must act in accordance with th Law, yet not like a slave, but like a child.