

SEVENTH EVENING LECTURE.

(November 7, 1884.)

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Fourteen days ago I communicated to you Luther's statement that without illumination by the Holy Spirit no person can properly distinguish the Law from the Gospel and that Luther had declared himself to be nothing but a feeble novice in this exalted and glorious art. My intention was not at all to cast you down and to discourage you. On the one hand, I wanted to cure those among you of their egregious self-conceit who have hitherto imagined that distinguishing the Law and Gospel is quite an easy accomplishment. On the other hand, I wanted to relieve the pusillanimous among you and encourage those who may be reasoning thus: "Well, if it was such a difficult task for Luther to acquire this art, I shall be much less capable of acquiring it."

If you will consider that it is only in the school of the Holy Spirit and of genuine Christian experience that the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is learned, you can easily perceive how it is possible that a person may be a graduate of all schools in existence and yet not have acquired this art. He must not think that the difficulties which have been noted in connection with this matter relate only to poorly gifted youths; they relate also to those highly endowed and well informed. As a matter of fact, the better gifts and the greater knowledge a person possesses, the more easily he is tempted to self-esteem and self-reliance, the more he is apt to take matters easy, and, accordingly, he never arrives at the knowledge of the proper connection and the proper distinction of these doctrines.

Chrysostom, you remember, was a great scholar and an excellent orator. His original name was John, but because of his oratorical gifts he was called "the Golden-mouthed" (= Chrysostom). He seemed to have the gift to do with his audience anything he pleased. He was equally able to make them glad or sad, to exult or to wail, weep, and sob, according to his pleasure. And yet the good man, upon the whole, accomplished little because he was poor in distinguishing the Law from the Gospel, habitually mingling the one doctrine with the other.

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Andrew Osiander furnishes another instance. He was a scholar with a keen intellect and an orator without a peer. At first he divided Law and Gospel in a very excellent manner. The draft which he sketched for the Augsburg Confession shows this. That was his status as long as he was pleased to be Luther's pupil. However, he became proud of his splendid gifts and great knowledge, and at length was utterly blinded in his judgment of himself. The consequence was that he got to commingle Law and Gospel in the most horrible fashion. He taught that a person becomes righteous in the sight of God, not by the righteousness which Christ, by His bitter suffering and death, has acquired for him, but by the indwelling of Christ with His essential divine righteousness in a person. Ah, do heed these warning examples!

Now, since a person under the pedagogy of the Holy Spirit learns rightly to distinguish the Law from the Gospel and to divide both, it follows that genuine Christians, be they

never so feeble otherwise, as long as they have duly experienced the force of the Law and the consolation of the Gospel or the power of faith, are best prepared to apply to others what they have experienced in their own lives. Accordingly, ministers who may be classed among the poorest intellectually not infrequently are found to be the best preachers. There is on doubt that in the past ages many a simple poor presbyter of no renown, in a small rural parish, divided Law and Gospel better than Chrysostom, the great orator in the metropolis of Constantinople, better than the philosophically trained Clement of Alexandria, better than that universal scholar Origen.

We observe the same phenomenon at the time of the Reformation. A simple parson like Cordatus, the intimate friend of Luther, unquestionably divided Law and Gospel a thousand times better than Melanchthon, called Preceptor of All Germany. This view will not be altered by the fact that Melanchthon tried to ridicule Cordatus by calling him *Quadratus*, a clumsy quadruped, because he had unmasked Melanchthon when the latter had begun to err in the doctrine regarding man's free will.

Accordingly, though it is a difficult achievement to divide Law and Gospel, he will best learn this art who has attained to the love of his Lord Jesus and has experienced the power of the Law and the Gospel.

This evening we are to consider that also for *theologians as such* the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is the highest and most difficult art and that everything else that a theologian must know is of less value than this art.

We read 2 Tim. 2, 15: *Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.* The apostle's admonition to Timothy to *study* indicates — does it not? — that dividing Law and Gospel properly is a great, difficult art.

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Our Lord declares, Luke 12, 42–44: *Who, then, is that faithful and wise steward whom his lord shall make ruler over his household to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing. Of a truth I say unto you that he will make him ruler over all that he hath.* What the Lord in this text terms a great achievement is not the mere recital of the Word of God, or, to stick to the simile, the apportioning of some food to every member of the household, but this, that every one is given his due portion at the proper time, that each one is treated as his spiritual condition requires. This must be done at the proper time. It is a poor steward that gives the servants something now and then allows a long time to pass before he gives them something again and is unconcerned about the quantity of food that he must provide and about the proper time to serve it. The lesson conveyed by this simile is this: A preacher must be well versed in the art of ministering to each in season exactly what he needs, either the Law or the Gospel.

That this art can be learned only from the Holy Spirit we see from 2 Cor. 2, 16: *Who is sufficient for these things?* and chap. 3, 4–6: *Such trust have we through Christ to Godward. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God, who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the*

letter, but of the spirit. From God alone the apostle expects his qualification for this high and difficult art. By the term *letter* he understands the Law; by *spirit*, the Gospel. We have here a plain testimony that both must be preached alongside of one another. The ability to do this no person possesses by nature; God must bestow it upon him. For this reason such a person must be divorced from the spirit of the world. No one still lugging with him the spirit of the world can ever properly learn how to make this distinction. For the Spirit of God does not dwell in a heart in which the spirit of the world still claims a place. That is the reason why the world cannot receive the Spirit. Accordingly, any one desiring to become a genuine δόκιμος, a servant approved to the Lord, must first become a Christian. He may possibly make a correct presentation of every dogma, but that is not sufficient. He must understand, besides, to minister to each soul in his audience the very thing it needs. This is possible when the preacher is able to make an exact investigation of the condition of each soul. True, that is very difficult, just as the diagnosis is the most difficult part of a physician's skill. Using the quick and sharp Word of God is not all that you have to do. With this sharp sword you may very easily slay souls if you do not minister to their necessities.

Accordingly, a minister must be able to distinguish whether he is facing a hypocrite or a true Christian; a person still spiritually dead or one that has already been roused from his sleep of sin; one who is tempted by the devil and his own flesh or one who has been given over to the rule of the devil because of his malice. An inexperienced person readily takes a hypocrite for a true Christian, etc.

Preach so that every hearer feels: "He means me. He has painted the hypocrite exactly as I am." Again, the pastor may have described a person afflicted with temptation so plainly that the actual victim of a temptation has to admit: "That is my condition." The penitent person must soon feel while listening to the pastor: "That comfort is meant for me; I am to appropriate it." The alarmed soul must be led to think: "Oh, that is a sweet message; that is for me!" Yea, the impenitent, too, must be made to acknowledge: "The preacher has painted my exact portrait."

Accordingly, the preacher must understand how to depict accurately the inward condition of every one of his hearers. A mere objective presentation of the various doctrines is not sufficient to this end. A person may be orthodox, may have apperceived the pure doctrine, but he is not in personal communion with God, has not yet settled his account with God, has not yet attained to the assurance that his debt of sins has been remitted. How can such a person prepare a Christian sermon? Here is where the saying which was current among the pagans applies: *Pectus facit disertum*, that is, true oratory is a matter of the heart. Indeed, the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is properly learned only in the school of the Holy Spirit, in tribulation. That is what makes people love to read Luther's sermons. At the start his sermons do not please. But when people conquer their dislike (perhaps because the pastor had pronounced a book of Luther's sermons a precious book), they are finally so highly pleased with it that they want no other. It is, indeed, a delight to read Luther's sermons. One finds his own likeness on every page. At first they give one a

terrible fright, stunning and stupefying one. At first Luther hurls one into the abyss, but, when that has been done, he says, “Do you believe this?” Answer, “Yes.” Then Luther says, “Very well, you may come up again.” Luther’s sermons are full of thunder and lightning, but these are speedily followed by the soft blowing of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel. It is impossible for the reader to resist; he cannot but admit that this is good, nourishing bread, the proper daily food for his soul. Luther does not point a long way; he does not propound many teachings how to get out of the abyss. As soon as he has made a person see that he is a poor sinner, he says to him: “Quit your despair; the grace of Christ is greater than the sins of the whole world.” At all times, Luther preaches the Law and the Gospel alongside of each other in such a manner that the Law is given an illumination by the Gospel which makes the former much more terrible, while the sweetness and the rich comfort of the Gospel is greatly increased by the Law, *i.e.*, by contrast. That is what you will have to learn from our dear father Luther. That will make people listen to you. That will rouse their interest; they will get the impression that you want to lift them out of perdition this very hour and send them away from church rejoicing.

But a preacher must exercise great care lest he say something wrong. Again and again he must go over his sermon and consider whether everything is quite as it should be, that there is nothing in the sermon contrary to either the Law or the Gospel. For instance, it would be incorrect to say: “As long as a person is afraid of dying, he is not a child of God.” That is a great falsehood. True, it is correct to say that Christians are not afraid to appear before God, but they still dread becoming a prey to corruption and decomposition in the grave, etc. A statement of that kind must promptly be struck from the sermon.

Again, young ministers who are very desirous of achieving results and accomplishing something — may there be many of them! — love to speak before worldlings of the blessed state of being a Christian. However, not infrequently they exceed the bounds of propriety by saying: “Oh, those poor worldly people! They are without any joys, any peace, any rest!” That is not true at all. When worldly people hear a statement of that kind, they think: “That preacher is a simpleton, to be sure. What does he know about us? We have joy, peace, and quiet indeed.” The preacher must express himself differently; he must admit that worldly people have their delights and enjoyments, but at the same time he must remind them that they are frequently visited with such thoughts as these: “What if it were true what the Christians are saying? If they are right, what will be my fate?” Amidst their riotous orgies the thought of death suddenly looms like a specter and turns their joys to bitterness. If the preacher addresses them thus, he forces them to acknowledge: “That man can give you a true picture of yourself!”

Again, if you were to portray Christians as being exceedingly happy people, utterly without worry and trouble of any kind, you would again not paint a true picture. Christians are in far greater anxiety, worry, and tribulation than worldly people. Yet, spite of all this, the Christian is far happier than worldly men. If God were to come this night and demand his soul from him, he would say, “Praise God! My race is run; soon I shall be with my Savior.” Amidst his tribulations this is his reflection: “Surely, it will not be long before I

shall come home to my Father in heaven, and all the misery and woe of this earth will be past and forgotten.” While Christians are weeping, the angels are rejoicing over them. While Christians are in anguish of soul and terror, God is cherishing the most cordial thoughts of love for them and calls them His beloved children. These are a few instances that serve to illustrate the danger of exceeding the limits of propriety, even with the best intention.

Another point that you will have to bear in mind while writing your sermons is not to say anything that may be misunderstood. For instance, this statement is liable to misconstruction: “Any one sinning purposely and knowingly falls from grace.” For true Christians occasionally sin with intent and knowledge, namely, when they are, so to speak, *rushed* by sinful passion from within or by allurements from without. Such sins are called hasty sins. Here is one with a wrathful temper, though, as a rule, amiable. Something crosses his path, and suddenly he boils over in angry speech. In such a case the Spirit of God will administer to the culprit this rebuke: “Behold, what a miserable creature thou art!” and prompt him to ask God’s forgiveness. It is true, indeed, that a Christian sinning intentionally grieves the Spirit of God every time. The Holy Spirit will not take part in his action. Regarding this matter we must therefore speak to people in this manner: “You are treading on dangerous ground. The Holy Spirit will withdraw from you, and instead of making progress in your Christianity, you will be thrown back. If you do not repent and remain genuinely penitent, this sin may be your ruin.”

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Equally liable to misconstruction would be this statement: “Good works are not necessary; only faith.” It would be correct to say: “Good works are not necessary to obtain salvation.” But I cannot remain on the way to heaven if I am going no good works. Besides, God has certainly commanded good works; He demands that we do good works.

The following statement, too, would be liable to be misunderstood: “Sin does not harm a Christian.” True, a sin committed because of the frailty of our flesh does not immediately hurl the doer into disfavor with God; nevertheless it *harms* him. “There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus,” says Paul; but he does not say: “There is nothing sinful to them.” — In fine, you cannot be too careful in your preaching.

It is faulty, likewise, not to explain some points at greater length. Here is an instance: Aegidius Hunnius, during his college years, on a certain occasion heard this statement during a service at church: “However, there is a sin that cannot be forgiven. That is the sin against the Holy Ghost.” Like a dagger that statement entered the young student’s heart. He promptly imagined that he had committed that sin. The result was that he planned suicide. He remembered that the Holy Spirit had indeed many a time knocked at the door of his heart for admission while he had been listening to the sermon, but in his youthful light-heartedness he had allowed these invitations to pass out of his mind. In a miraculous manner, however, God rescued him from his great anguish of conscience. Approaching his seat in the classroom one day, he found a leaf torn from a precious book of devotion written by Magister Spangenberg. It contained remarks about this very sin against the Holy Ghost, this statement in particular, that a person, after committing this sin, is *unwilling to repent*

until his death. That saved Hunnius. And it is due to the fact that even in his youth he had to pass through such great tribulations that he became the great theologian he was.

The difficulty of properly dividing Law and Gospel is still greater in the pastor's private ministrations to individuals. In the pulpit he may say sundry things, hoping that they will strike home. But when people seek his pastoral counsel, he is confronted with a far greater difficulty. He will soon observe which of his callers is a Christian, which not. This is not saying that the pastor may not be deceived by the pious mien and manners of a hypocrite. However, if he can rightly divide Law and Gospel, his callers may have deceived him, but it is their own fault if they applied the wrong teaching to themselves. A fearful responsibility is assumed by the pastor only in case he himself is to blame if his people misunderstand him. If people act like Christians, only to deceive me, they deceive themselves rather than me. A pastor must treat any person as a Christian when he appears to be one, and *vice versa*.

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However, not all unchristians are alike. One is a crass and scurrilous irreligionist and a scorner of the Bible; another is orthodox and possesses the dead faith of the intellect only. The minister — unless he is himself a slave of sin and incapable of forming a judgment of the person before him — recognizes in the latter a person spiritually blind and still in the bonds of spiritual death. Now, if an unchristian has become truly alarmed and filled with an unnamed dread, though he is still unbroken, the pastor must say to himself: "This person must first be crushed." Some are addicted to a vice, others are self-righteous. To discover to which class these various unconverted persons belong and to apply the proper medicine to them, that is the very difficulty of which I am speaking. My object is to convince you that a preacher can be truly fitted out for his calling only by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the greatest difficulty is encountered in dealing with true Christians according to their particular spiritual condition. One has a weak, another a strong faith; one is cheerful, another sorrowful; one is sluggish, another burning with zeal; one has only little spiritual knowledge, another is deeply grounded in the truth.

A word in conclusion. In order that a pastor may correctly judge and treat people, it is of the utmost importance for him to understand temperaments. When observing a fault of temperament, my intellectual vision must not become blind to a person's good traits. For instance, a person of sanguine disposition is always of good cheer, never troubled with gloomy thoughts, and yet he may not be a Christian. These traits are inborn in him. Now, if you discover the sanguine temperament in a certain person and he becomes sad when you preach the Law to him, you may take it for granted that the Word has taken effect in his soul. When you meet a person of melancholy disposition and observe that he is habitually sad and of an austere mien, you must not forthwith conclude that he is sorrowing over his sins. But when he suddenly becomes lively while you proclaim the Gospel to him and you observe something in his demeanor contrary to his natural temperament, you may safely conclude that the Gospel has taken effect in him. Or you may meet with a phlegmatic person, who loves his ease and hates to be disturbed in his reflections. Do not think when you have calmed such a person that you have done so by preaching the Gospel. Or, lastly, you may have to deal with a person of choleric disposition. When he becomes despondent

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under your ministration, you may be assured that it was through the effect which God's Word had upon him.

When listening to the sermons of inexperienced preachers, you may not be able to say that they have perverted either the Law or the Gospel, but you will frequently have to say that Law and Gospel have been merged the one into the other. That the proper division of Law and Gospel is the highest art of theologians, Luther testifies in his *Sermon on the Distinction between the Law and the Gospel* (St. L. Ed. IX, 806f.): "To express in words that the Law is a different kind of teaching than the Gospel; that is something everybody can do. But to reduce this distinction to practise and make it operative, that is a huge task. St. Jerome, among others, has written a great deal concerning this matter, but he talks like a blind man about colors."

Luther treated learned men with great respect. He called Erasmus a valuable man because he had caused the study of the languages to flourish; but he did not call him a doctor of Holy Writ. Why not? Because *this one* art Erasmus did not understand. A person may be most highly gifted and may have been trained fifty years for the sacred office of the ministry, and still he will not properly distinguish between the Law and the Gospel if he has not received the Holy Spirit. Here is where the theologian meets his Scylla and Charybdis. In either direction he can lead souls to perdition and become guilty of a grievous offense to poor Christians.

In his comment on Gal. 2, 14 Luther says (St. L. Ed. IX, 159): "Let any one who knows well how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel thank our Lord God; for he can easily pass for a theologian. In my tribulations I did not, alas! understand this as well as I should have." An ordinary preacher may be an excellent theologian, and another, though he has studied all the languages, and God knows what other things besides, may not even be worthy of the name of theologian. Not man, but God, makes theologians. If you think that this statement goes to far, you are still blind. If you had had any experience, you would admit that this is a very difficult art.