

EIGHTEENTH EVENING LECTURE.

(February 13, 1885.)

Without question, my friends, the condition of a prisoner who is awaiting execution for his misdeeds and is unable to verify a vague rumor of his pardon is dreadful. He starts at every creaking of the door of his prison because he does not know whether the person coming to see him is bringing him his authentic and definite pardon or is to take him to the place of execution. At such a time only a completely depraved, reckless, and abandoned atheist would be capable of jesting and frolicking.

In a spiritual view every person is by nature in a similar condition. Since the human race, in its progenitors, fell away from God, every person is by nature under a divine sentence of temporal and eternal death. True, every person has heard a vague rumor that God has pardoned him, but he cannot arrive at any certainty about it. In any mortal illness, in any great calamity, especially in moments when his heart and conscience are filled with unrest, dread, and terror, he has the sensation that the portals of eternity are swinging open to receive him, but the poor wretch does not know whether he is entering into eternal death or eternal life. In such a state of mind only the most abandoned can preserve an outward calm; every other person will quake and tremble. Though he may have laughed at holy matters, he will not feel like laughing then.

Can you imagine that the loving, kind, gracious, and merciful God has done nothing to make us certain that we have the forgiveness of our sins and that in yonder world we shall enter the mansions of eternal peace and rest? Did He really do nothing to rescue us out of our dreadful condition? It is impossible that He should have done such a thing. Assuredly, God has done something; yea, He has done something so great that it exceeds our conception. He sent His only-begotten Son into this world, had Him become a human being like us, laid the burden of our sins upon Him, and gave Him up to be crucified for the atonement of our sins. It is impossible to imagine that, having done all this, He would during our whole life leave us in a dreadful state of ignorance whether He is still our enemy and whether our dying day will be our judgment Day. No; as soon as the eternal Son of God had become man and entered into this world, the highest messenger was dispatched from the throne of grace to this earth to proclaim to the shepherds at Bethlehem, and in them to us, to all of us, to the entire world: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great Joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Luke 2, 10–11. After Christ had finished His great work, after God the Father had raised Him from the dead and therewith pronounced Him, our Surety and Substitute, free from all guilt, and had justified and absolved us all in Him, Christ commanded His disciples: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel," that is, the joyous message of the finished redemption, "to every creature," Mark 16, 15, adding these words:

“Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world,” Matt. 28, 20. With these words Christ testified that the joyous message which He was committing to His disciples is to echo throughout this terrestrial globe until the Last Day.

In view of this, are we not blessed, highly favored men? Our bliss beggars description. Heaven and earth are full of the goodness and grace of the Lord, our God. Anywhere and everywhere all things cry to us: “You are redeemed; your sins are forgiven; heaven is thrown open to you. Oh, believe it, do believe it, and you have this bliss.”

But, alas! this unspeakable Joy is sadly vitiated to our highly favored race by false doctrine. That we noted in our study during the last three evening lectures. Let us strengthen the conviction which we have gained still more, first, in order that we may not make the cup of inexpressible joy which the Father in heaven has filled for us bitter to ourselves, and secondly, in order that upon your initiation into the office by which reconciliation is proclaimed you may not withhold from men what God has given them long ago, yea, what He had designed for them from eternity.

The ninth thesis, now before us, is really the central thesis in this entire series. Any one who understands this thesis can rightly divide Law and Gospel; but any one who does not understand it will never learn the division by any other rules.

We have seen that the rejection of absolution by sectarian preachers proves that they do not know how to divide Law and Gospel. They have not only an entirely incorrect conception of the character of absolution and of our doctrine of absolution, but, observing that outwardly we seem to do like the papists, they also reject our doctrine of absolution as a papistic notion. But though the papists use ever so sweet terms in pronouncing absolution, nevertheless they are offering the people husks, with the kernel removed. We keep the precious words of absolution, but we also seek to offer the kernel to those who seek absolution and invite them to relish it.

In the Gospel pericope for the 19th Sunday after Trinity we have the story of the paralytic whose sins the Lord forgave. This action of the Lord Jesus induced murmuring on the part of the hypocritical Pharisees, who said: “This man blasphemeth. Who can forgive sins except God alone?” They imagined they had manifested great wisdom in their criticism of the Lord. But the Lord promptly hushed them. He asked them: “Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be

forgiven thee, or to say, Arise and walk?” Matt. 9, 5. They refused to make a reply because they knew the Lord would catch them in their own words. If they would say: “It is easier to say to a person, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee,’ than to say to a paralytic, Arise and walk,” they were afraid that He might say the latter, for the Lord had by that time performed many miracles. And, behold, the Lord proves His ability to cure paralysis miraculously; for upon His word the man sick of the palsy takes up his bed and goes to his house rejoicing. The people who witnessed all this knew that Christ was a man — which He was indeed. His miracle did not offend them because He had already given them powerful evidences that He was also the Son of God. And now they begin glorifying God for having given to *men* ‘the power to forgive sins.

If this had been a superstitious notion of the people, the Holy Spirit would surely have added a remark to this effect: The poor people imagined, contrary to fact, that such power had been given to men. Not a word of this in the evangelists’ account. The Holy Ghost inspired the people to make that statement, and while they made it, they may have reflected on their happy condition under such a Messiah. For when people have been kept in a poor pasture spiritually, where the consolations of the Gospel were vitiated to them, and they have become famished sheep, the usual experience is that they lay hold with eager joy on the luscious grass of the pure Gospel when it is brought to them.

Instances of this can be observed in Germany. The churches of rationalists are empty, but every church whose pulpit is occupied by one who preaches with the manifestation of the Spirit and of power, is filled. The people still have their Bibles, their catechisms, their old hymn-books; they cling to the old Bible-passages which they have learned; they relish their old devotional books, and when they get a live minister, who preaches the Gospel to them, they are overjoyed.

Alas! there are other preachers, who, while they are believers, preach in such high-flown language that it passes the comprehension of the people. In such instances we behold the spectacle of a believing pastor and a congregation of spiritually dead people. Not only must we proclaim the truth, we must also speak a language so simple that a peasant listening outside of the sanctuary can understand it and feel himself drawn into the church. With noonday clearness we must show the one way of salvation than which there is no other. It would not be surprising if God were to hurl His lightning at every

preacher who has filled his manuscript with high-flown terms, intending to shine by his oratory. Such language is not understood by the common people. It may, at best, enter their intellect, but it does not enter their hearts, where it ought to lodge.

Let us hear what *Luther* writes in his *House Postil*, in his exposition of the Gospel pericope for the 19th Sunday after Trinity (St. L. Ed. XIIIa, 917): “The Anabaptists likewise say: How can we receive forgiveness of sins through Baptism? There is nothing but a handful of water there. If we are to be really purged from sin, the Holy Spirit must do it; water cannot do it. In this manner they take forgiveness of sins away from the Word and refuse to leave the matter where the good people in the Gospel put it, who glorified God for giving such power unto men. The Sacramentarian fanatics, likewise, say that in the Sacrament there is mere bread and wine, hence forgiveness of sin cannot be found there. The Spirit must provide that; the flesh profits nothing.

“To sum up, no sectarian spirit, no priest or monk has been able to see that forgiving sins is a power conferred on men, as this Gospel-lesson states. Learn, then, how to speak of this matter. I know well enough, and also confess, that God alone forgives sin. But I must know, too, how I may perceive that my sins are forgiven or by what means this is done. Regarding this point the Holy Scriptures teach me and all Christians, when we desire forgiveness of sin, that we must not sit down in some nook with the prayer: My God, forgive me my sins, and then wait for an angel to come from heaven with the announcement: Thy sins are forgiven thee. For God promises that He will descend in His Word and there assure me of the forgiveness of my sins.

“Now, this is done, first, in Holy Baptism, which is connected with God’s command to baptize men in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; furthermore, with the promise: ‘He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.’ You object: Is not Baptism mere water? True, but this water is not alone; God’s Word goes with it. Likewise, when you go to your pastor, who has been given a special commission, or to any other Christian and desire to be comforted and absolved from your sins, and he says to you: I, in God’s place, announce to you through Christ forgiveness of all your sins, — when this happens, you are to be certain that by such external word your sins are truly and surely forgiven; for Baptism and God’s Word will not prove lying devices to you. Such things were not preached in the Romish Church, and to this day no papistic preacher understands them. Therefore thank God for this

mercy and learn that God wants to forgive sins in no other way than is here written, *viz.*, by giving the power to do it to men. Christ here makes a beginning of this power and later commands that henceforth to the end of the world this order is to be observed in the Church, that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be preached. Let every one, then, learn that he must seek forgiveness of sins from men and nowhere else. For thus reads the command of our Lord Christ: ‘Verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,’ Matt. 18, 18; likewise: ‘Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them, John 20, 23. For God will not tolerate the building of special ladders and stairways to heaven to suit every individual; He alone wants to be the Architect.

“Accordingly, if you desire forgiveness of sins, go and be baptized if you are still unbaptized; or if you have been baptized, keep in remembrance the promise which God made you at your baptism and be not unbelieving. Likewise, go and be reconciled to your fellow-man and then ask for absolution. And as you hear the announcement of the forgiveness of your sins in the name of Jesus, believe it, and, verily, you have it. After that go to the most venerable Sacrament and receive the body and blood of Christ unto the assurance that this precious treasure is meant for you and that you may enjoy it as your own, etc. Baptism, absolution, preaching, and the Sacrament are not to be despised, but in them forgiveness of sin is to be sought and obtained. To this end God has called and commissioned your pastor, your father and mother, and your closest Christian fellow-men and has put His Word in their mouth, that you are to seek consolation and forgiveness of sin from them. For although men are talking to you, still, what they say is not their own, but God’s Word. Therefore you are to believe it firmly and not to despise it. ...

“The Anabaptists, then, and other sects have lost at one stroke the forgiveness of sins, Baptism, the Sacrament, the Christian Church, and all Christian works because they reject the Word when they hear it from their fellow-man and regard it as nothing better than the bleating of a calf. Well, suppose God were to speak to you through some cow or other animal, as once upon a time He spoke through an ass, still you are not to despise His Word, but regard it as valid. Why, then, will you despise it when men speak it by the command and order of God? For though you hear, indeed, a man’s voice, you do not hear a man’s, but God’s Word and surely will receive the forgiveness of sins attached to it, if you will but accept it by faith.”

The people whom Luther criticizes look upon the baptismal water with the eyes of a cow and imagine we teach that our help is to be derived from water. Ah! it is not the water that helps. No peculiar virtue has been put into the water. Baptismal water is water like other water, but it is connected with this Word of God: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." When these words are added to the water in Baptism, baptismal water becomes as precious as, yea, more precious than, heaven and earth and all the treasures of the world. Since God wants to save us only by grace and exclusively through faith, He tells us: "Thou wishest to be saved. Very well, be baptized and believe My promise, and as truly as I am God, thou wilt be saved. Thou art not to look upon yourself and ask, What am *I* to do towards my salvation? Thou remainest a condemned sinner and obtainest salvation from the free grace and mercy of God." The Anabaptists construct an entirely new way, concerning which the Bible does not say a word, namely, that men are to struggle until they can say, "Now I feel that I have obtained grace." That is an awful doctrine, much more harmful than most men imagine.

Just reflect on a case like this: You have quite grievously insulted some one; the recollection of your act torments you, and you desire pardon and the restoration of friendship with the person you have insulted. How are you to become assured that he has forgiven you? Will you wait until your heart has a feeling of relief, which makes you think that your former friend has forgiven you? If you adopt that plan, everybody will tell you that you are silly; for the important point is not how *you* feel, but how the party feels whom you insulted. Or will you obtain assurance of having been forgiven by receiving a gift from your former friend? No; that would increase your uncertainty, for the insulted party may want to make you feel that he is not a wretch like you. He may want to make you thoroughly ashamed of yourself by gathering fiery coals upon your head. Now, what other way is there to arrive at the assurance that you have been forgiven? None other than this: the insulted party must *tell* you that he has forgiven you. When he comes to tell you not to worry about his being angry with you because of the insult you offered him, when he says: "Your action was indeed abominable, but all has been forgiven; cheer up, we want to be friends again," then you know — do you not? — that he has forgiven you. Our case with God is identical with this. You cannot infer from your feelings or from the divine blessings showered upon you that God has forgiven you; for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and

sends rain upon the just and the unjust. You can draw that inference only from the fact that He *tells* you that you have been forgiven. A person seeking for this assurance in any other way will not find it, but only deceive himself by imagining that he has found it in some other way.

But where does God tell us that He has forgiven us? Why, in His Word, in the Gospel, in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper, at absolution. In the Holy Supper the real gift of grace which we take from it is not our partaking of the body and blood of Christ, but the promise of the forgiveness of sins which Christ has attached to the promise of His body and blood to be received by us: "which is given for you," "which is shed for the remission of sins." The body and blood of Christ are but the royal seat which the Savior affixes to His words. Briefly, then, in everything that God does to assure us of His grace the Word occupies first place.

This applies also to absolution. Here, too, the Word is of paramount importance. That is the reason why we are not to waste much precious time waiting for an angel to come from heaven with the announcement of our forgiveness. God has given us no promise to that effect. If He had, we could indeed confidently ask for such a messenger; for although we are poor sinners, God is willing to bestow on us the greatest gifts. What He has promised He will perform. He says: "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." Ps. 81, 10. He has promised us forgiveness of our sins; if we believe that, we have it. But people will not believe this.

Calvin was dissatisfied with Zwingli's interpretation of the Lord's Supper, but his own interpretation was also wrong. He said that a person desiring to receive the body and blood of Christ could not get it under the bread and wine, but must by his faith mount up to heaven, where the Holy Spirit would negotiate a way for feeding him with the body and blood of Christ. These are mere vagaries, which originated in Calvin's fancy. But an incident like this shows that men will not believe that God bears us poor sinners such great love that He is willing to come to us. The fanatics think that they must ascend to Him, while He has already descended to us. This is not surprising; for the Gospel is that kind of doctrine that it is a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. It is that still, not only to the circumcised Hebrews and to the uncircumcised heathen, but even to thousands upon thousands in Christendom.

Note, lastly, that in the citation just adduced Luther admits no difference between absolution by an ordained minister and absolution by a layman. Of this matter we shall hear more anon.

Furthermore, Luther writes in his *Gospel Postil* (St. L. Ed. XI, 731 f.), commenting on the words: “As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whosoever sins ye remit,” etc., as follows: “Christ means to say: Whenever you pronounce a word of absolution upon a sinner, that shall have been spoken in heaven and shall be as valid as if God Himself had uttered it. For He is in your mouth; therefore your speaking amounts to His speaking. Now, it is certainly true that when Christ, the Lord over sin and hell, speaks these words over you: ‘Thy sins shall be removed,’ they must be removed, and nothing shall hinder it. Again, when He says: ‘Thy sins shall not be forgiven thee,’ they remain unforgiven; and though you should exhaust your utmost strength in the effort, neither yourself nor an angel nor a saint nor any creature could forgive your sin. The power to do this, however, is vested in every Christian. ... It is a power which we derive from the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

“However; in order not to fall into the ways of the Pope, we must treat this matter carefully. The papists have forced upon the words of Christ this meaning, that *they* possess the power of which Christ speaks and whatsoever and in whatsoever manner *they* speak, must come to pass *because they have said so*. No, Mr. Pope, that power you have not; only the Divine Majesty has it. They say, when the Pope utters one word conveying absolution, a person’s sins are gone, even if he is void of both contrition and faith. Accordingly, they imagine it is in their power to give or take away, open or close heaven, or cast people into hell. It will be a long time before that will happen. For from this claim it would follow that our salvation is based on human works, power, and authority.

“Now, since this claim is contrary to the entire Holy Scriptures, it cannot be, Oh Pope, that when *you* close or open, a closing or opening must take place *because of you*. The true interpretation of the words of Christ: ‘Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them,’ etc., is, that they establish the authority, not of the person who speaks, but of those who believe these words.”

If Christ were not risen, we could not administer absolution; for on what would we base it? Not until God the Father had acknowledged the work of

Christ's reconciliation and redemption, not until He had absolved Christ, and in Him all men, by raising Christ from the dead, have we mortals become justified in saying to a fellow-man: "Be of good cheer, all thy sins are forgiven and their record is wiped out. Only believe!" This declaration is based on the fact that God the Father has glorified Christ, our Proxy, and therewith has proclaimed in the presence of heaven and earth that all men are redeemed and reconciled and their sins forgiven.

During my first visit in Germany more than thirty years ago, I heard, to my regret, from a highly esteemed, believing minister the statement that a layman may proclaim truths of great comfort to others, but that he cannot administer absolution, that being a privilege which God has reserved for ministers, ordained and installed by the Church. The conception which this clergyman had of absolution was none other than that of the papists. I fought the view which he had expressed strenuously, but without success. The statement, repeated after the Pope, that sins are forgiven when a minister makes a statement to that effect, but not when a layman does so, is simply awful.

No; the removal of sins is not based on a mysterious power of the pastor, but on the fact that Christ has taken away the sins of the world long ago and that everybody is to tell this fact to his fellow-men. This is the duty, naturally, especially of preachers, not, however, because of a peculiar power inherent in them, but because God has ordained their office for the administration of the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. In an emergency it becomes evident that a layman has the authority to do what a prelate or a superintendent does, and to do it just as effectually.

You can see from all these facts that our doctrine of absolution is the very opposite of the papists' doctrine. It does not contain a trace of papism. The Pope curses and abominates our doctrine. Does he not make the sweeping statement that no person can be certain of his salvation or his justification? Bellarmine, called the greatest of the papistic theologians, writes, in his chapter on "Justification" (chap. 3): "The doctrine that in the present life men cannot attain to an assurance of faith regarding their righteousness, with the exception of a few whom God deems worthy to have this fact revealed to them by a special revelation — this doctrine is a current opinion among nearly all theologians." He means to say: "I shalt give you the Bible and ask you to find your name in it, and particularly the assurance that your sins have been forgiven. You will not find it. But there are a few men, like Peter and Paul, to

whom God has revealed this fact in a supernatural manner. But you cannot be certain of your justification and salvation.” Is not this an abominable doctrine of the devil? The Romish Church calls itself the mother of all churches, and yet it robs Christians of all comfort; it tells them to their face: “You cannot be certain that you will be saved. You will have to wait until after your death, until you enter eternity, to find this out from your actual experience.” There is a terrible, diabolical cruelty in this teaching.

Over against the worthiness of the confessor, Luther emphasizes the importance of faith in absolution. Even if the confessor were a perfectly holy person, without the least unrighteousness, and free from every blemish, yea, if he were an exemplary saint, that would not contribute one iota to the validity of absolution. But the Word of the Gospel, without which no one can obtain salvation, is powerful and salutary, making absolution valid. This is what the faith that saves grasps and builds upon, rather than the personality of the party pronouncing absolution.

Let me present one more citation from Luther’s incomparable treatise *On the Keys*. For myself I have to confess that it was from this treatise that I first learned what the Gospel is, at a time when I thought I knew it, but did not. I shall praise and thank God for this forever. When I became a Christian, you know, I got among the Pietists. The reading of Luther’s writings brought me around to the pure doctrine.

Luther had written a treatise on the keys previous to this. On reading it over, he did not like it and wanted to destroy it. Vitus Dietrich heard of his intention and begged him most earnestly to send him the treatise. Luther complied with the request on condition that the treatise be not published, nor was Dietrich to show it to anybody, because the treatise did not measure up to Luther’s plan, and Luther decided to write another treatise. But it was published nevertheless in the eighteenth century. I possess a copy of it. It is a very excellent treatise, but surpassed by the second treatise, from which I shall quote.

Luther says (St. L. Ed. XIX, 943 ff.) : “Consider, furthermore, that the keys, or the forgiveness of sins, are not based on our contrition or worthiness, as our adversaries teach perversely. Their teaching is utterly Palagian, Turkish, heathenish, Jewish, Anabaptistic, fanatical and antichristian. On the contrary, our contrition, our works, our believing heart, and all that we are, must be built

up on the keys, and with entire boldness we must confidently trust in them as in God's Word, never doubting in the least, as dearly as we love our body and soul, that what the keys state and confer is as certain as if it were stated and conferred by God Himself. For it is certainly He that is speaking in this matter, since it is His command and Word, not the word or command of man. If you doubt this, you make God a liar, pervert His ordinance, and found His keys on your contrition and worthiness. True, you must be contrite, but to think that the forgiveness of sins is to be made sure and the work of the keys confirmed by your contrition means to forsake the faith and deny Christ. He does not propose to forgive and remit sins for your sake, but for His own sake, from pure grace, by means of the keys.

“Christ says: ‘Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth,’ etc. Observe that He promises most assuredly that what we bind or loose on earth shall be bound or loosed. *These keys work without a fault.* He does not say: What I bind or loose *in heaven* you shall also bind or loose on earth, as the teachers of faulty keys foolishly assert. When would we learn what God binds or looses in heaven? Never. Well, then the keys would be useless and their application futile.

“Nor does He say: You must know what I bind or loose in heaven. Who could know that? But this is what He says: Bind and loose on earth, and I shall bind and loose with you in heaven. Do the work of the keys, and I shall do it also. Yea, when ye have done it, it shall be accounted as done, and there will be no need of My doing it after you. I am telling you that what you bind or loose need not be bound or loosed by Me, but shall be bound or loosed without My binding and loosing. Your work and Mine shall be one identical operation, not two operations. Do *your* work, and *Mine* shall already be accomplished. Bind and loose, and I shall have bound and loosed. He obligates Himself to enter into our work. Yea, He commands us to do His own work. why, then, should we make everything uncertain by inverting the process and claiming that He must first bind and loose in heaven? As if His binding and loosing in heaven were different from our binding and loosing on earth, or as if He had keys in heaven different from those on earth, when He plainly and clearly states that these keys are the keys of heaven, not of the earth.

“*These ideas of two kinds of keys arise when men do not regard God's Word as God's Word, but as men's word because it is spoken by men.* People imagine God up in heaven to be far, far away from His Word here on earth.

They stand gaping towards heaven for His Word and fabricate other keys, different from those we have. ... Be not deceived by such pharisaical prattle, by which they deceive themselves, saying, How can a man forgive sin when He cannot bestow grace nor the Holy Ghost? Cling to the words of Christ, and *be assured that God has no other way of forgiving sin than by the Word which He has commanded us to speak. If you do not seek forgiveness in His Word, it is in vain for you to stand gaping towards heaven for grace, or for what they call 'inner forgiveness.'*

“I hear you raising the objection which sectarian spirits and sophists raise, saying: Bah, many hear of the binding and loosing by means of the keys; but they do not mind it and stay unbound and unloosed. Therefore there is something else needed besides the Word and the keys: *the efficient force is the Spirit, the Spirit, none other than the Spirit.* Do you really believe that, when a person refuses to believe in the binding key, he remains not bound? Let me tell you that in due time he will find out that his being bound on account of unbelief was not a futile act and did not fail of the intended effect. *Likewise, a person who refuses to believe that he has been released and that his sins have been forgiven will find out in due time how surely his sins had been forgiven him in this present time while he refused to believe it.* St. Paul says, Rom. 3, 3 ‘What if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God of none effect?’ Our present discussion is not about believing or not believing in the keys. We are well aware that few believe in them. But we are speaking of what the keys effect and give. Of course, if a person does not accept what they give, he has nothing; but that is not the fault of the keys. Many disbelieve the Gospel, but that does not make the Gospel a failure or a lying message. A king gives you a castle; if you do not accept it, that does not make the king a liar nor his gift spurious. You have cheated yourself; it is entirely your own fault; the king certainly gave you the castle.”

It is a fine list of predicates that Luther, at the beginning of this citation, applies to his adversaries. But he is right. As soon as I stake my interests on my own contrition, I do not need Christ. Contrition is necessary, but not as a means for acquiring forgiveness of sins. If I am a proud Pharisee, what do I care for the forgiveness of sins? I shall be like the surfeited glutton who turns up the nose at the finest food and drink that is set before him. Most nominal Christians are so utterly surfeited that they will decline this precious food for their soul with a disgusted *no*.

Contrition, then, is necessary. Let us not misunderstand our good Luther. He did not proclaim the consolations of the Gospel to sinners living in carnal security; he gave them no comfort. But when a person was contrite and longed for forgiveness of sins, he would say to him: Here it is; take it, and you have it.

Luther is right also in advising men not to inquire at all about the quality and sufficiency of their contrition. For any person to build his hope on that means to build it on sand. On the contrary, a person is to praise God for the absolution he has received; that makes his contrition salutary. The right procedure is not to base the validity of absolution on our own contrition, but to make our contrition rest on our absolution.

Luther insists on faith in the declaration of Christ: “Thy sins are forgiven thee,” To disbelieve this statement is tantamount to making Christ a liar. Though a minister pronounce the absolution to such a person ten times, it would not benefit him. We cannot look into people’s hearts; but that is not necessary at all; we are to look only in the Word of our heavenly Father, which informs us that God has absolved the entire world. That assures us that all sins have been forgiven to all men.

Query: Does this apply also to an impious scoundrel, who may be plotting burglary to-night, with the object of stealing and robbing? Indeed it does. The reason why he is not benefited by absolution is because he does not accept the forgiveness offered him; for he does not believe in his absolution. If he believed the Holy Spirit, he would quit stealing.

Another query: Is it right to absolve a scoundrel of this kind? Answer: If he is known to you as a scoundrel, it is wrong because you know that he will not accept forgiveness. Knowing this, you would commit a great and grievous sin by performing the sacred act of absolution for him and thus cast your pearls before swine. But absolution itself is always valid. If Judas had received absolution, his sins would have been forgiven by God; but he would have had to accept forgiveness. To obtain this treasure, there must be one who bestows it, and another who receives it. An unbeliever may imagine and even say that he accepts forgiveness, but in his heart he is resolved to continue his sinful life and to prefer serving the devil. Hence the true doctrine of absolution does not make men secure, but thoroughly and radically plucks them out of the devil’s kingdom. That is something altogether different from what moralists are doing when they put a white veneer on a black personality.

Luther's remarks about faulty keys are directed against the abominable false teaching of the papists. When they are asked whether they absolve also scoundrels and what the benefit of absolution is in such a case, they reply that in such a case the key is faulty because it will not fit into that particular key-hole and the right key has not been furnished them. Our key is never faulty, because we only repeat what God has spoken. It is man that is at fault. If he is impenitent, he is not benefited by the application of the releasing key, but he only increases his damnation twofold.

Note Luther's remark that we have the keys of heaven here on earth.

As to the so-called "inner forgiveness" on which fanatics insist as being a matter of chief importance, they never know whether theirs is really the inner, or heartfelt, forgiveness of the Holy Spirit or of their own spirit of fanaticism.

It is certainly true what Luther points out, *viz.*, that on the Last Day many will be surprised when God will recount to them all the Sundays on which He stood ready to absolve them, while they would not believe Him and thus made Him a liar. They will see that they have often stood at the gate of heaven and refused to enter.

What Luther says about a King's gift of a castle to a subject must be applied to absolution. In that act God really offers forgiveness to all, even to unbelievers and scorners of a gift which they think cannot be real it is because brought to them by a man like themselves. These deluded people do not consider that it is God Himself, not man, that does the forgiving. The minister may personally be a son of Belial, and yet he forgives people's sins when he pronounces absolution to them. Why? Because what he does is done in the name and by the command of God. Oftentimes kings have sent out wicked servants with orders to their subjects, and these commands were just as valid as if the king had published them in person.

Rightly, therefore, Luther urges this point regarding absolution: "It is God's command and word which the confessor speaks and the penitent hears. They are *both* in duty bound, as they love their souls, firmly and stoutly to believe this doctrine like any other article of faith." Indeed, also the minister, in the act of pronouncing absolution, is in duty bound to believe that all sins of his clients are forgiven. If he does not do this, he is a sacrilegious miscreant, who dares to open his mouth to pronounce absolution, while in his heart he regards the whole action as a burlesque designed to fool the stupid masses."