

TWENTY-NINTH EVENING LECTURE.

(May 29, 1885.)

Without question, the words which, in Rev. 3, 15, 16, Christ addressed to the bishop of the church at Laodicea are of a memorable and awful import. He said: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot. I would thou wert cold or hot. So, then, because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth." We see from these words that in the infallible judgment of God it is worse to be a lukewarm than a cold minister; it is worse to be a lazy and indifferent minister, who serves in his office because it is the profession in which he is making his living, than to be manifestly ungodly. For when a minister, though not teaching or living in a plainly unchristian manner, is so sleepy, so void of all earnestness and zeal for the kingdom of God and the salvation of souls, the inevitable effect is that the poor souls of his parishioners become infected by him, and finally the entire congregation is lulled into spiritual sleep. On the other hand, when a minister leads a manifestly ungodly life and teaches ungodly doctrine, the good souls in his congregation do not follow, but turn away from him with loathing. Now, although greater damage is inflicted on the Church by the lukewarmness of a minister than by his manifest ungodliness, still both kinds of ministers will at the end of the world receive the same sentence. Both the lukewarm and the cold minister will be addressed in those awful words: "I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity." Matt. 7, 23.

A faithful servant of Jesus Christ, however, will one day hear himself addressed in these words of inexpressibly glad import: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant! Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Matt. 25, 21. A faithful minister must not only avoid being lukewarm or cold, he must be warm. His heart must glow with love of his Savior, Jesus, and of the congregation which his Savior has entrusted to his care, so that he may be able to say with Paul and all the apostles: "Whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God." 2 Cor. 5, 13. This is a strange dictum. Paul says that a minister must manifest greater earnestness and zeal than the majority of the members of his congregation may like or approve. The apostle does not mean to say that in his ministry at Corinth he displayed zeal without knowledge, Rom. 10, 2, but that

he was more zealous than the Corinthians desired. Every sincere preacher and minister of Jesus Christ shows himself full of zeal and earnest determination, though he may not reap any better reward from his congregation than unpopularity, hatred, and enmity. A sincere minister will go through such experiences rather than gain any one for himself by hushing the truth, veiling it, or grinding down its sharp points.

It is an undeniable fact, then, my friends, that a minister, in particular, a really zealous minister, *has to* take his *ministry* seriously, or he commits a grievous sin. However, he can commit a grievous sin also when his presentation of Christianity and the demands which he makes upon Christians are *in excess of what the Word of God declares*. With this reflection we have arrived at our seventeenth thesis.

Thesis XVII.

In the thirteenth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when a description is given of faith, both as regards its strength and the consciousness and productiveness of it, that does not fit all believers at all times.

Young ministers who are still without great experience frequently make this mistake. They desire to make an impression on their people and rouse them out of their natural security. They imagine that, in order to prevent hypocrites from regarding themselves as Christians, they cannot raise the demands which they make upon those who are Christians too high. However, here is a point where the minister must be careful not to go beyond the Word of God, or by reason of his zeal he will inflict awful harm on the souls of his hearers. Alas! Christians are in many respects quite different from the descriptions, *bona-fide* descriptions, at that, which are given of them in sermons. The minister wants to rouse his people and warn them against self-deception. However, that cannot be his *ultimate aim*. His ultimate aim must be to lead his hearers to the assurance that they have forgiveness of sins with God, the hope of the future blessed life, and confidence to meet death cheerfully. Any one who does not make these things his ultimate aim is not an evangelical minister. For this reason he must be careful, for God's sake, not to say: "Any one who does this or that is not a Christian," unless he is quite sure of his ground. Frequently a Christian may act in a very unchristian manner.

Rom. 7, 18 Paul says: *I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is*

good I find not. It is plain that in this passage the apostle describes a Christian. How a person becomes a Christian he had described before. Next, he proceeded to show how a Christian ought to walk and to please God. In the section of his epistle from which the above passage is taken he begins to discuss the doctrine of spiritual tribulations in which Christians frequently are merged, in order to comfort them. He describes a Christian as a double being. The true Christian, he says, always desires what is good, but frequently he does not accomplish it. Now, then, if a preacher describes a Christian in such a manner as to deny that, unless he accomplishes all that is good, he does not really will what is good, the description is unbiblical. To will what is good is the main trait of a Christian. Frequently he does not progress beyond the good will to do something. Before he is aware of it, he has gone astray; the sin within him has come forth, and he is ashamed of himself. But for that reason he has not by any means fallen from grace.

Rom. 7, 14 Paul says: *For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.* He means to say: "Who would not gladly be rid of sin? As for me, I am like a slave sold to a master. I cannot get away from him; I am always being tyrannized by him." That is the condition of a Christian: he feels like a slave, with this difference, however, that he does *not* obey his master *gladly* as a *Christian* slave must obey. He renders obedience with the utmost reluctance. Accordingly, the apostle cries in v. 24: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Remember this, partly for your own comfort, partly for the task of comforting the members of your future congregation. The prevailing spiritual malady of our time is lack of assurance on the part of Christians. This is because they are not given any reliable teaching. Now, when a real Christian is shown what a miserable sinner he is, he clings to Christ all the more firmly and spurns the whispering of the devil, who tells him that he is fallen from grace and has lost God.

Phil. 3, 12 Paul says: *Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.* In this life we follow after, but we do not apprehend. It may seem to a Christian that there were times when he was holier and could overcome sin better. That may actually have been the case, and his present condition may be due to his spiritual retrogression. But the correct explanation of his present state may also be this, that he sees much

more plainly now what a frail being he is. A young Christian may imagine that his heart at that particular moment is altogether pure, that he has forsaken the world, and has heaven in his heart. But he is not aware of the ravenous beasts that lie in wait for him. When the sweetmeats of his spiritual childhood cease and tribulations arise for him, he imagines that he can no longer fight against sin as he used to do. The truth is, however, that he is being attacked much more violently than before and is more keenly aware of his sinful cravings.

Gal. 5, 17 the apostle writes: *The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.* According to this text a minister has no right to denounce a person as an unchristian because he is not doing all that he should, as long as the person maintains that he does not will his imperfections. If he commits sin from weakness or in rashness, he can still be a Christian.

St. James writes, chap. 3, 2: *For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man and able also to bridle the whole body.* He means to say that there is no such things as a perfect man, and by the use of the pronoun we he includes himself, all the apostles, and all the saints in this estimate. A Christian sins not only in thoughts, desires, gestures, and words, but also in his actions, which makes it evident to all the world that he is still a poor, weak man.

Heb. 12, 1 we read: *Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.* According to this text a Christian is always putting away sin, which besets him continually. He cannot get it out of his heart, and it makes him so very sluggish. His conduct would be quite different, he would walk cheerfully with his God like a hero, if he did not have to lug his carnal mind with him.

Is. 64, 6 we read: *We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.* The prophet does not say: All righteousnesses of the natural man are as filthy rags, but: “*all our righteousnesses.*” Hence in God’s eyes the life of a true Christian cannot look very beautiful. If God would not spread the cloak of Christ’s

righteousness over us, we should have to be eternally damned and lost, spite of the fact that we have become true Christians.

A text that requires no comment is Job 14, 4: *Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one.*

Ps. 32, 6 we read: *For this shall EVERYONE THAT IS GODLY pray unto Thee in a time when Thou mayest be found.* Immediately before this text the psalmist speaks of the forgiveness of sin. He says that it is just the genuinely godly people who need to pray every day for the forgiveness of sins.

But why spend much time searching the Scriptures for proof-texts? Our Savior taught all Christians to offer up this daily petition in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses." Every day, then, puts a new burden of guilt on our heart and conscience. Now, to represent a Christian as he is not, namely, perfect, — one need not be a Methodist to do that, — or to enumerate marks of a true Christian which are not found in all Christians, means to misrepresent a Christian and will do infinite harm. For from such characterizations, Christians with a very live conscience will draw the conclusion that they are no Christians; the remarks of the minister, they say, have opened their eyes to their former delusion. This impression may become so firmly lodged in their hearts that nobody will be able to remove it. They torment themselves till their dying day with efforts to keep from falling into this or that sin, and still they commit it again and again. Therefore the minister must furnish Christians the proper remedy when they sin, namely, this, promptly to rise from their fall, provided their sin is not intentional; for an intentional sin would indeed drive the Holy Spirit from them. But a Christian learns by experience to sense danger; and when he has sinned, he feels himself urged promptly to seek his Father in heaven, confess his sin, and ask to be forgiven for Jesus' sake. He also feels inwardly assured that he has been forgiven, and even if he has no such feeling, he will say with the poet: —

Oh, my faith shall e'er enfold Him,
Till I come where I behold Him,
Till my Bridegroom calls for me.

Some preachers describe the Christians as having nothing but pleasant feelings. Frequently I have observed this feature in your sermons. You will say: "Indeed, an unchristian is a miserable being. While serving the world and sin, he is pursued by furies." Now, that is not true. Many unchristians live without any qualms of conscience. "On the other hand," you will say, "a

Christian — oh, what a happy being he is! He is free from all anxiety, free from doubt,' etc. All this is not so. Thousands upon thousands of Christians are, on the contrary, filled with anguish and despondency and are continually fighting with themselves and crying: "Oh, wretched man that I am!"

In your sermons you like to treat subjects like these: "The blessed state of a Christian," and the like. Well, do not forget that *the blessedness of Christians does not consist in pleasant feelings*, but in their assurance that in spite of the bitterest feelings imaginable they are accepted with God and in their dying hour will be received into heaven. *That* is indeed a great blessedness.

You can easily make a mistake here without being aware of it. You must resolve never to utter anything that is contradictory to the experience of Christians. You must search your own minds and imagine yourselves sitting among your hearers and listening to your own sermon. Suppose you were listening to another preacher, how would his question whether you are a Christians alarm you if the true state of a Christian were made contingent upon pleasant feelings and you would have to admit that you know of no such pleasant feelings? Now, is it not an awful experience for a pastor to write a sermon in condemnation of himself? to feel that he would be deadly frightened if some one were to preach to him what he purposes to preach to others? It is, indeed, proper that in your sermons you depict the happy moments which occasionally come to Christians when they are given a foretaste of their future bliss; but you must tell your hearers at the same time that these are merely passing moments in the lives of Christians, sun-rays which once in a while find their way into their hearts. If the description of such moments of bliss is given in a proper manner, it produces neither anguish and grief nor doubt regarding one's being in the faith, but a heartfelt longing for an experience such as the preacher is describing. Especially such Christians as have fought their fight faithfully will feel that way. They lay prostrate in their spiritual distress and imagined that they were rejected by God, and, lo, then their heavenly Father was pleased to pour such celestial joy into their hearts that in their ecstasy they believed they were no longer on earth, but in heaven.

Furthermore, you must bear in mind that a Christian retains his natural temperament even after his conversion. A person with an irritable temper keeps that disposition, and it may frequently get the better of him. You must not say, then, that when a person becomes a Christian, he is turned from a bear into a lamb, in the sense that he is willing to take scolding and scorn from

everybody and is always ready to forgive his fellow-men. On the contrary, a Christian often has great trouble in keeping down his temper, and frequently he cannot control it, and nobody can quiet him. He is completely in the power of his temperament. We must not think that if this person were to die that night, he would go to perdition. While a Christian who is critically inclined indulges that thought about his brother, that brother may be on his knees in his closet, pleading with God for forgiveness and for strength to subdue his wrathful temper. He may meet the Christian who has judged him so uncharitably the next morning and sincerely ask to be forgiven for his lack of self-control.

Frequently the Christian is pictured as patient as Job. The preacher will say: "You may take everything away from a Christian, and he will cheerfully say: 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord'" (Job 1, 21), and the preacher may think that his remarks have been quite Biblical. Job did indeed say those words, but not all Christians say them. It is not consistent with truth to set up such a claim in a sermon. Many a Christian grows impatient in trouble. His impatience may become violent even over trifling matters. When he spiritually comes to again, as it were, he is ashamed of himself.

It cannot be said to be a criterion of a Christian that he never commits a gross sin. That does happen occasionally; but whenever this is the case, the Christian surrenders unconditionally to the Word of God, even though he may not do so immediately. He may at first be so blinded by the devil that he believes he is right. Finally, however, God's Word convinces him that he was wrong, and then he humbly asks forgiveness, while a hypocrite persists as long as he can in the claim that he has done right.

Many preachers picture the Christian as a person who does not fear death. That is a serious misrepresentation, because the great majority of Christians are afraid to die. If a Christian does not fear death and declares that he is ready to die at any time, God has bestowed a special grace upon him. Some have expressed this sentiment before their physician told them that they would not live another night, but after that they were seized with a terrible fear.

Do not, for God's sake, draw a false picture of a Christian; but whenever you have drawn the picture of a Christian, see whether you can recognize yourself in that picture.

Even pride in a very pronounced form can crop out in a Christian, and that is one of the worst vices, because it is a transgression of the First Commandment. By nature we are all proud; only one is more strongly inclined to that sin than another. Persons of a choleric temperament, possessing what is called a strong will and great energy, as a rule, have a great deal of self-confidence and expect others to show them reverential regard — a result of abominable pride. This sin sometimes crops out even in true Christians. Observe the disciples of the Lord quarreling with one another about who was the greatest among them. If this incident had not been recorded in the Bible, we could hardly believe that the apostles quarreled like children about their superiority and that the mother of Zebedee's sons requested that one of them be placed at the right and the other at the left hand of the Lord. From the account in Luke we gather that the disciples were ill at ease during this quarrel because they knew that their conduct was shameful, and when the Lord rebuked them, they felt so deeply ashamed that they would have liked to hide themselves.

Again, it is wholly incorrect and false to picture the Christian as being always fervent in prayer and as if praying were his most cherished occupation. It is not so; it takes much struggling on the part of the Christian to make him fit for prayer, fervent in it, and confident that he will really obtain from God what he is praying for. That is the reason why the Lord's Prayer, which is recited so often, has been called the greatest martyr on earth. Christians are no exception to the rule. True, if a person, as a rule, merely babbles the Lord's Prayer, without knowing what he is saying, he is certainly not a Christian. A Christian who becomes aware of his lack of attention during prayer feels deeply humiliated and promptly starts the Lord's Prayer over again. Though there are times when the Christians' flesh and blood are forced into the background and they feel as if they were dissolving in happiness, as if they were in heaven and conversing with God, they nevertheless retain their natural flesh and blood.

Christians are even tempted with the desire to grow rich. Merchants, in particular, are in great danger of turning misers. If they were not warned and admonished, they would be dragged into perdition as if caught in a snare, and would be lost forever.

In judging any person, it is of decisive importance to know whether he loves the Word of God and his Savior or whether he is hardened and leads a shameful life. There are people who want to make a show of great sanctity by avoiding conversation, raising their eyes piously to heaven, citing Scripture

continually, and reading their Bible in leisure hours, preferably in retirement, in order to impress people with their exemplary Christianity. By this show “the heavenly prophets” succeeded in deceiving good Melanchthon. We must not think that only those are true Christians who make a display of godliness. I do not assert that every one of these people is an unchristian, but I am sure that such as are wholly given to the aforementioned practises are miserable hypocrites. Read the gospels and note how the disciples conversed with the Lord and how they acted in His presence. They expressed their minds plainly, even John, the beloved disciple. Christ did not for that reason denounce them as unconverted, but treated them as converted people who, however, still carried a pretty vigorous portion of the Old Adam with them.

You may, in your sermons, refer to actions of *strong* or exceptionally *faithful* Christians. It will not harm your hearers to think that they have not yet attained to such a degree of faithfulness; it will rather prove an incentive to them to make better progress in their Christianity.

When new members are to be received into the congregation and you have to talk to them, you must not regard them as godless, unconverted people if they do not immediately engage in a religious conversation with you. There are people who cling to their Savior, but are unable to talk much about their faith, although on other topics they may be ready talkers. Others, again, may not have much experience as regards spiritual affairs and for that reason may not be able to say much.

In conclusion let me submit a citation from Luther’s *Church Postil*. He says (St. L. Ed. XII, 911 ff.): “That explains why St. Paul admonishes his Christians to such an extent as to make it appear as though he were overdoing it; for in all his epistles he is so determined about inculcating these matters upon them as if they were so stupid and ignorant, so inattentive and forgetful, that of themselves they did not know them and would not do them, but only on being told and urged to do them. He knows that, although Christians have made a beginning of faith and are at that stage where they are to show forth the fruits of their faith, still they have not yet done so, nor have they finished their task. Accordingly, it will not do to think and say that it is sufficient to preach the doctrine to them and that, where the Spirit and faith are at work, the fruits of faith and good works will follow of themselves. For though the Spirit is

present and, as Christ says, operates in believers and makes them willing, still the flesh, on the other hand, is also present, and the flesh is always weak and tardy; moreover, the devil never rests, but tries, by tribulations and temptations, to cause the Christian to slip and fall because of the weakness of his flesh, etc.

“For this reason we must not treat our hearers as if they were in no need of being admonished and urged by God’s Word to lead a godly life. Beware of negligence and laziness in discharging this duty! For the flesh is slothful enough to obey the spirit, as Paul says, Gal. 5, 17: ‘The flesh lusteth against the spirit, ... so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.’ Therefore God must act like a good and diligent manager of an estate or magistrate who has a lazy servant or slothful officials under him, although in other respects they are not unfaithful or wicked. Such a one must not think that, when he has issued one or two orders, the task that he wants done is accomplished; he must be continually after his workmen and urge them to do their work.

“Likewise, we have not yet reached the point where our flesh and blood would be active and leap forward with sheer joy and delight to do good works and obey God, such as our spirit desires and our faith demands; on the contrary, with all our incessant urging and prodding we can scarcely get them to move. What would happen if we were to quit our admonitions and our urging and assume — as many secure spirits do — that everybody knows well enough what he has to do, having heard his duties recited to him so many years and having even taught them to others, etc.? I believe that, if preaching and admonition were to cease for a year, we should become worse than the worst heathen.”