

THIRTY-FIRST EVENING LECTURE.

(June 12, 1885.)

The fact that sin exists and the question how it originated are two of the greatest problems with which the mind of man is wrestling. Even the more serious philosophers of pagan antiquity were occupied with this highly important and grave subject. Being ignorant of the fact that God, at the beginning, created man perfectly good according to His image and that man soon after, having been misled by the devil, fell from his first estate, they naturally could not discover the awful character of sin and its origin. As a rule, they did not proceed farther in their reasoning than to say that sin is an innate weakness and frailty of man. Others, like Zoroaster, Manes, and many of the Gnostics, wishing to push their inquiry further, asserted a twofold primeval principle, or primeval essence, one good, the other evil. They claimed that what is good in man was derived from the good, what is evil in him, from the evil principle. But after all is told, they did not perceive the terrible abomination that sin is.

It is a pity that even in the midst of Christendom there are people without number, both baptized and unbaptized, who do not know what sin is. Some, like the rationalists, claim that man is naturally good and becomes evil and sinful only through evil examples, wrong education, and sensual enticements which he has not the strength to resist steadfastly. Others, like the pantheists, atheists, and materialists, claim that sinning is in no way worse than eating when you are hungry or drinking when you are thirsty; it is merely satisfying a natural craving. The majority of them go still further, claiming that sin has been the indispensably necessary means by which man has developed his self-consciousness. The notorious philosopher Hegel says right out that without the fall into sin, Paradise would have been nothing but a zoological garden; so necessary he considers sin. He is unable to conceive that sin might be injurious; on the contrary, he treats it as the transition from the state of barbarism to that of self-conscious thinking.

This blindness concerning sin is the chief cause of the almost universal rejection of the Gospel in our time. People who fail to recognize the horrible nature of sin will decline to accept the sacrificial death of the Son of God for the reconciliation and redemption of this world of sinners; for they consider it utterly unnecessary and hence regard the story of the Gospel as a miserable fable.

It is therefore one of the most important requisites of a true, evangelical minister that he know how to depict for his hearers the true nature of sin in terms that are as plain and distinct as they are terrible, drastic, and impressive. For without a real knowledge of what an awful thing sin is man cannot understand and accept the Gospel. As long as he is not alarmed over sin as his greatest enemy and the most awful abomination indwelling in him, he will not come to Christ. Still less, of course, can there be a proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel without a true and adequate knowledge of sin. This leads us to our next thesis.

Thesis XIX.

In the fifteenth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher speaks of certain sins as if they were not of a damnable, but of venial nature.

Unless you ponder the highly important matter now before us well, you will lack much of the clear vision that you ought to have for the proper discharge of the ministerial office.

We have already seen that a distinction must be made between mortal and venial sins. A person failing to make this distinction does not rightly divide Law and Gospel. But the distinction between these two kinds of sin must be made with great care. It must be clearly shown that the distinction is made for the purpose of proving that certain sins expel the Holy Ghost from the believer. When the Holy Spirit is driven out, faith, too, is ejected; for no one can come to faith nor retain it without the Holy Ghost. Sins which expel the Holy Ghost and bring on spiritual death are called *mortal sins*. Any one who has been a Christian will readily perceive when the Holy Spirit has departed from him by his inability to offer up childlike prayers to God and to resist sin stoutly and bravely as he used to do. He will feel as if he had become chained to sin, like a slave. It is a good thing if he has at least this knowledge of his condition, for thus he may be brought back to God. But while this condition endures, he is not in communion with God.

Venial sins are termed such as a Christian commits without forfeiting the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They are sins of weakness or rashness; frequently they are called the daily sins of Christians.

While inculcating this distinction upon our hearers, we must be scrupulously careful not to create the notion in them that venial sins are sins

about which a person need not be greatly concerned and for which he does not have to ask forgiveness. A preacher who leads his hearers to entertain this view becomes the cause of their perdition. He makes them carnally secure and drives the fear of God from their hearts. That is not the true evangelical way of preaching about these sins, nor is it, in general, a true evangelical notion that only he is a real evangelical preacher who does not preach the Law a great deal. Both the Law and the Gospel must be preached, the one in its sternness, the other in its sweetness. A preacher who does not preach both does not deserve the name of an evangelical minister, but is a false leader and is sowing the Gospel as if he were casting wheat into the ocean, where no crop can be raised. It happens only too often that preachers, when speaking of the distinction between venial and mortal sins, create the impression that to Christians venial sins are matters over which they need not worry. Since all are sinners and no one ever gets rid of sin entirely, there is no reason why one should feel disturbed because of these sins. A talk of that kind is really awful and ungodly.

Matt. 5, 18–19 the Lord says: *Verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the Law till all be fulfilled. Whosoever, therefore, shall break, one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* This is one of the most awful sayings found in Scripture. The Lord does not say: “He shall *be* the least,” but: “He shall *be called* the least.” “The least” means the most reprobate, or one whom God does not acknowledge as His own. That will be the *sentence* passed on him in the kingdom of God and Christ. Therefore you should with trembling approach the task of preaching both the Gospel and the Law. Do not speak of one jot of the Law, of one of the so-called least commandments, as of something about which a Christian need not be greatly concerned.

The connection in which the Lord uttered these words is worthy of note. In the words preceding them He states that He is come to fulfil the Law. Now, inasmuch as the Lord had to fulfil every law and every commandment in our stead, it is shocking in any man, poor, sinful worm that he is, to want to dispense with a single law of God and to treat it as a matter of no importance. Those who entertain notions of this kind are no Christians. If any man has manufactured for himself some secret comfort from this notion, he has

miserably belied and cheated himself. Also in this matter a true Christian manifests himself as a person who fears to commit a single sin.

The Lord also speaks of a person “who shall *teach* men so.” It is bad enough when a person for his own part disregards some law and leads a careless life; but it is much worse when he preaches his lax views and leads men to perdition by his preaching. He will have to render an account to God of his preaching, and on that day he may not excuse himself by claiming that it was only trifling matters which he had represented as so unimportant that no one need grieve over them. A Christian grieves even over trifles, but unchristians imagine that they can “escape by iniquities,” Ps. 56, 7. [Luther: “What evil we do is already forgiven.”] That is the slogan of the wicked, just as it is the easy-going way of unconverted people to speak of their iniquities thus: “Well, I can easily make amends, and grass will soon grow over it.” No grass will ever grow over anything for which forgiveness has not been asked of God.

Matt. 12, 36 Christ says: *I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give an account thereof in the Day of Judgment.* By a concrete example we are shown in this text how abominable it is to speak of sins which are in themselves venial and are automatically remitted by God, because He does not regard them as a great evil. Those who speak thus represent God, the Holy and Righteous, as a feeble, old man, like Eli, who saw his sons sin and merely said, “Nay, my sons!” I Sam. 2, 24, thinking that therewith he had done his full duty. True, God is Love, but He is also Holiness and Righteousness. To the person who rises up against Him God becomes a terrible fire, and His fiery wrath pursues the sinner into the lowest hell. Let men of the world ridicule and scorn this teaching, they will have to pay dearly for their laughter, like the people of Sodom, Gen. 19. Any evil word for which a sinner is tried on Judgment Day is sufficient for his condemnation. Now, is there a Christian who can say at the end of a day on which he has spoken much that he has not uttered a single idle word? Few Christians will be able to say that. Even for an idle word Christians must ask God’s pardon with a contrite heart and promise to guard their lips better in the future. If God were not to forgive their idle words, these alone would damn them. There is no sin venial in itself; but there are such sins as will not hinder a person from still believing in Jesus Christ with all his heart.

Jas. 2, 10 we read: *Whosoever shall keep the whole Law and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.* Let us assume that Scripture contained a thousand commandments. In reality there are more than a thousand, because those that have been recorded state only general principles, for which we are to find the applications. Now, according to this text, if a person had kept nine hundred and ninety-nine out of the thousand commandments, he would be guilty of the whole Law. That applies to every one of the so-called venial sins. Unless a Christian clearly understands this fact, he ceases to be a Christian. What constitutes a person a Christian is this believing knowledge, that he is, in the first place, a miserable, accursed sinner, who would be lost forever if Christ had not died for him; and that, in the second place, Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, has redeemed him, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won him from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil. A Christian must regard himself as a lost and condemned sinner, or all his talk about faith is vain and worthless.

Gal. 3, 10 Paul writes: *For as many as are of the works of the Law are under the curse; for it is written. Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the Book of the Law to do them.* The curse recorded in this clear passage will descend on every one that does not continue to do all things that are written in the Book of the Law. Hence there can be no sin that is venial by its nature. Sins are venial only for Christ's sake.

I John 1, 7 we read: *The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin.* The apostle says "from all sin," not "from all mortal sins, all grievous sins, all gross sins." Hence, the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, must have been required also for canceling the so-called venial sins. That being so, venial sins in themselves must also be mortal sins. Sin is something awful, because it is ἀνομία, lawlessness. It is rebellion against the holy, omnipotent God, our supreme, heavenly Lawgiver. When a sinner adds wilfulness to his act, he tears down the manifesto which a king has had posted in public and tramples upon it. In an unlimited monarchy the punishment for such a crime is death. We may not have torn down the Law of God publicly, but are daily acting contrary to it. For this we are to *express* our heartfelt *regret*. A true Christian is not like a brazen criminal who carries his head high; he is not hard-hearted, but contrite. If he is reminded of any word that God has spoken, he accepts it immediately with due humility. Anybody may utter a warning or

a rebuke to a Christian, and it will be accepted. Occasionally he may resist for a moment and, as Luther puts it, allow the devil to ride him, but unless he is beside himself and for a while does not see that his conduct is unchristian and ungodly, he soon feels a fire burning in him, and it will not take long before he begs God and men for forgiveness. Without a broken spirit a person may talk ever so much about the Christian faith; it is all worthless, as he is in the power of sin. Let us, then, continue to believe that sin, no matter what its character may be, is never venial in itself. For anything that has been done contrary to the Law, the Law has to condemn the doer.

A cognate text is Matt.5, 21–22: *Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time. Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the Judgment. But I say unto you. That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the Judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire.* Is there a Christian who need not blame himself for having been angry at his brother, even though it was not for a long time? It was done in weakness; nevertheless he has committed a sin of which he has to be ashamed. When Christ says: “He is in danger of the Judgment,” He treats anger and murder alike. The term “raca” signifies that anger in the heart breaks forth in angry words and gestures. It reaches its worst stage when the angry person cries, “Thou fool!” The Law promptly consigns such an angry person to hell-fire.

All these texts prove that the so-called venial sins are not venial in themselves, in their nature, but damnable, mortal sins. Only of the believer it is written: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus,” Rom. 8, 1; but a believer is the very person who regards sin as a very serious matter.

Lest you imagine that no one could possibly preach this false doctrine concerning venial sins, let me cite what the papists teach in the *Roman Catechism* (II, 5, Qu. 46): “All mortal sins must be told to the priest. For venial sins, which do not separate us from divine grace and into which we fall rather frequently, may be properly confessed for a person’s ease of mind; ... but they may also be withheld from the priest with impunity and may be atoned for in many different ways. Mortal sins, however, ... must be rehearsed one by one; ... for it is their nature to inflict a more grievous wound on the soul than those sins which men are in the habit of committing freely and publicly.” Here you

have the anti-christian doctrine that no absolution is required for venial sins. It is naively expressed, but it reveals an abysmal iniquity and draws down upon the papists the sentence of the Lord: “He shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.” Matt. 5, 19.

Over against this teaching *Kromayer* writes (*Theol. posit.-polem. I*, p. 511): “There is no sin that in its nature is venial. We must steer a middle course between the Roman Scylla and the Calvinistic Charybdis.”

Among venial sins the Romanists number sinful desires that do not materialize in acts. However, shameful libertines may not carry into action the abominable fantasies in which they delight while lying in their beds; they may shrink from executing them because of the notoriety that would follow, but they must be told that they are living in mortal sins. Trifles, such as stealing a pin, are treated by Romanists as venial sins. I remember that my parents impressed on us children that we must not even steal a pin. It is well if parents train their children to a scrupulous fear of the least wrong-doing, because it would be regarded as a serious matter by their father and might rouse his anger.

Let me cite a statement of *Socius* in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (p. 448): “It seems to be certain that in a person who otherwise confesses the faith of Christ with his heart *one* sinful act cannot have the effect of consigning him’ to eternal death. When we are told concerning sins unto death, the reference cannot be to a *single* sin, but to habitual sinning.” According to Socinian teaching we need not ask God’s forgiveness for an occasional sinful slip. Sin, according to this view, does not exclude a person from the kingdom of God unless it becomes a vicious habit.

Let me submit a few testimonies from the writings of *Luther*. I shall cite, first, a passage from his *Exposition of the Theses Discussed at Leipzig* (St. L. Ed. XVIII, 833 ff.). The second thesis which Luther maintained reads: “To deny that a person sins even in his good deeds, that *venial sins are such not by their nature*, but solely by the mercy of God, or that sin remains in an infant also after baptism, means to trample Paul and Christ under foot.” Luther comments on this thesis as follows: “Accordingly, it is another grievous error of the theologians that they manifest hardly any concern about venial sins and prate that a venial sin does not offend God, at least only to a pardonable degree. If venial sins are such trifling sins, why is it that even the righteous are scarcely saved? Why can the righteous not endure the judgment of God and be

declared righteous? Why are we urged with such earnestness, and in no trifling or figurative sense, to pray: ‘Forgive us our trespasses; Thy will be done; Thy kingdom come; Hallowed be Thy name’? Is it not manifest that these miserable theologasters first extinguish the fear of God in men and then make soft pillows for people’s arms and heads, as Ezekiel says (chap. 13, 18), dispense them from this prayer, and quench the Spirit? Spite of all they may say, it is not a trifling matter to depart from the Law and will of God a hairbreadth, nor is the mercy of God which pardons venial sins a trifling matter. These people, then, treat the Law and the will and the mercy of God as something ineffectual, and the result is that the prayer of the righteous is not fervent, nor is their gratitude kindled. Let us beware of this pharisaical leaven!”

Again, *Luther* writes, in his exposition of the *Theses Concerning Indulgences, against Tetzel*, of the year 1518, in his comment on Thesis 76 (St. L. Ed. XVIII, 260): “Here I should have expatiated on venial sin, which is lightly regarded nowadays, as if it were not a sin at all, to the great harm of many people, I fear, who are securely snoring away in their sins and are not aware that they are committing gross sins. I confess that during all my reading of the scholastic teachers I have never understood what a venial sin is, nor how great it is. I do not know whether they understand these things themselves. I want to state briefly: Any person who is *not in constant fear of being full of mortal sins and does not act accordingly, will scarcely be saved*. For Scripture says, Ps. 143, 2: ‘Enter not into judgment with Thy servant.’ Not only venial sins, as they are nowadays called by everybody, but even good works cannot bear the scrutiny of God’s judgment, but are in need of pardoning mercy. For the psalmist does not say: Enter not into judgment with Thine enemy, but: ‘with Thy servant’ and Thy child that is serving Thee. This fear ought to teach us to sigh for the mercy of God and to trust in it. Where this fear is lacking, we trust not so much in the mercy of God as in our own conscience and in the fact that we are not conscious of having committed any gross sins. *Such people will meet with a fearful judgment.*”

Evangelical preaching means that sin must be magnified. The minister must pronounce a severe judgment on sin, for He is to proclaim the judgment of God. Also venial sins you must not regard lightly. You must remember that you sin so much every day that God would have to cast you into hell, but that He will not do it because you believe in Christ. Always remind yourselves

that, if God were to deal with you according to His justice, you would belong in hell, not on a pleasant couch. You are to be in such fear and behave in such a way as if you were full of deadly trespasses. It is awful to hear one say nonchalantly: “Now my conscience is at ease.” It is certainly a pitiful condition for a person to be in, *viz.*, to have an unconcerned conscience while the Word of God pronounces condemnation upon him.

Dannhauer, in his *Hodosophia* (p.195), uttered an important axiomatic truth by saying: “Sin is as great as He is who is offended by it.” Since God is offended by sin, there is in sin an immeasurable wickedness and an immeasurable guilt.

Finally, Christian experience also proves that in its nature no sin is venial. Any true Christian will tell you this to be his experience, that, as soon as he had sinned, he felt an unrest, which continued until he had asked God for forgiveness. In every true Christian the conscience promptly rings an alarm. A Christian merchant becomes restless over five cents in his receipts that do not belong to him. A Christian is reproved by his conscience for wrongdoing when he has treated a brother discourteously or in loveless fashion. For the slightest offense which he has given by his sinful conduct he apologizes, and he has no rest until he has done so. Is not that remarkable? It shows that venial sins, too, are something evil, a fire that may be kindled for our perdition. *Small sins become great when they are regarded as small.*