

THIRTY-SIXTH EVENING LECTURE.

(September 25, 1885.)

One should think that after their fall into sin and unutterable misery all men would with great joy accept the doctrine of Holy Scripture that a person is made righteous and saved by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ, and that they would perceive from this very doctrine that the religion of the Bible must be the only correct one, because it is just the religion which poor sinners like them need. Alas! the very opposite is the case. Unto this day the world has again and again stumbled and been offended just as this doctrine of Holy Scripture, which the Apostle Paul has expressed in these words: “So, then, it is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth, but of God, that showeth mercy.” Rom. 9, 16. Accordingly, the apostle had to testify even in his day:

“We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block and unto the Greeks foolishness.” 1 Cor. 1, 23. Yea, in those days it was actually a disgrace, in the opinion of the whole world, to proclaim this Gospel of the free grace of God in Christ Jesus, so that the apostle had to assert: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ; for it is the power fo God unto salvation to every one that believeth.” Rom. 1, 16.

For in every man there is hidden by nature a blind, self-righteous Pharisee. Accordingly, all who have not been enlightened by God through the Holy Spirit imagine that the best and most reliable religion must be a religion that makes the most numerous and most grievous demands upon man in order to gain salvation; for, salvation being something inexpressibly great, man would unquestionably have to achieve something exceedingly great to obtain it. Accordingly, when man as he is by nature observes that certain religionists make their salvation a real irksome task, he imagines that these people surely must be traveling the straight road to heaven.

When the priests of Baal displayed such zeal in the worship of their idol that they “cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets till the blood gushed out upon them,” 1 Kings 18, 28, the poor blind people imagined that they were the true prophets of God and challenged the other prophets to do likewise. This continued until the prophet Elijah, by a miracle, revealed the hypocrisy of the priests of Baal. Again, when the Pharisees and scribes, in the days of Christ, taught the people that, to be saved, they must fulfil the entire Law of Moses, to the very last title, and, in addition, keep the traditions of the elders, the poor blind masses imagined that the religion of their Pharisees and scribes must surely be a better religion than that of Christ, who called to Himself even the most besotted and abominable sinners and offered and promised them mercy. Again, when false teachers found their way into the congregations which the Apostle Paul had founded in Galtia, they said to the members of those congregations: “Paul may be a powerful speaker, but he is pointing you a way to salvation that is too easy and too broad.” They said that, to be a Christian, one must, among other things, indeed believe in Christ, but besides, that one must also keep the Law of Moses to be saved. In a short time nearly all congregations in Galatia fell away from Paul and his doctrine, being deluded by the false glamor which those false teachers spread about themselves.

That has been the way at all times. Why does such a mass of people, why do so many millions, remain under Popery spite of the fact that Popery has been revealed as antichristian? On account of the glamor of good works with which the papists surround themselves. Why do so many people in our country fall in with the preachers of fanatical sects? Because these sects spread the glamor of great sanctity about themselves. *Alas! man regards the works of God as trifling, but esteems the works of men highly.* That is nothing but one of the sad results of man's fall into sin.

Would that this horrible confounding of Law and Gospel, and in particular, this horrible leavening of the Gospel with the Law, occurred only in Popery and among the fanatical sects! Sad to say, this takes place even in our dear Evangelical Lutheran Church. It has occurred in former times, and the same error is still proclaimed in our day from Lutheran pulpits, although not in such a crass form. Under this head belongs the error which has been rejected in the second part of our twenty-second thesis, to which we shall now turn our attention.

The so-called Pietists of former times and the preachers of the fanatical sects in our time not only made a false distinction between awakening and conversion and refused to regard those who were awakened as Christians, but they also mistook the inability to believe for not being permitted to believe.

When the Pietists had brought a person to the point where he considered himself a poor, miserable sinner, unable to help himself, and asked his minister what he must now do, the minister did not, like the apostles, answer him: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," but, as a rule, they told him the very opposite. They warned him against believing too soon and against thinking that, after having felt the effects of the Law, he might proceed to believe that his sins had been forgiven. They told him that his contrition must become more perfect, that he must feel contrite, not so much because his sins would call down upon him God's anger and hurl him into perdition, but because he loved God. Unless he could say that he felt sorry for having angered his merciful Father in heaven, his contrition was declared null and void. He was told that he must feel that God was beginning to be merciful to him; he must get so far that he could hear an inner voice telling him: "Be of good cheer; thy sins will be forgiven thee; God will be merciful to thee." He must continue struggling until his agony was over, and having rid himself of

the love of sin and having been thoroughly converted, he might begin to take comfort.

Now, this is an awful method. The truth is, we are not to be converted *first* and *after that* believe; we are not to have a sensation first that we are in possession of grace; but without any feeling we are first to believe that we have received mercy, and after that will come the feeling of mercy, which God apportions to each according to His grace. Some persons are without feeling of grace for a long time. They behold nothing but darkness about them; they feel the hardness of their hearts and the powerful stirring and raging of evil, sinful lust within them. Accordingly, to point a person to the way of salvation, it is not the proper procedure to tell him that, even when he feels himself a poor, lost sinner, he may not yet believe himself saved.

True, no man can produce faith in himself; God must do that. A person may be in such a condition that he cannot believe, and God is not willing to bestow faith on him. A person who still considers himself sound and righteous cannot believe. "The full soul loatheth an honeycomb." Prov 27, 7. A soul spiritually sated and surfeited tramples on the honeycomb of evangelical consolation.

John 5, 44 we read: *How can you believe which receive honor one of another?* These words, which the Lord addressed to the Jews, are unquestionably directed chiefly against the Pharisees. As long as a person is ambitious of honor, he cannot come to faith, because seeking one's honor is to be numbered with all other mortal sins. By the above statement the Lord has declared that a person who simply will not quit a certain sin, *can* not believe in Him. The Law must first crush the sinner's heart before the sweet comfort of the Gospel is applied to him. But from this fact the inference must not be drawn that the sinner *may* not believe. It is forever true that any person may believe at any time. Even when he has fallen into the most grievous sin and, realizing suddenly that he has forsaken God, rises with a crushed heart, he may believe. Whoever tells him that he may not yet believe is either a wicked person or one who in this respect is still blind.

To tell a person that he may not believe is, in the first place, contrary to the perfect redemption of Christ from all sins and to the perfect reconciliation which He has accomplished. For in 1 John 2, 1. 2 the apostle says: "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the Righteous. And He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." The entire world, then, has been reconciled. The wrath of God

which hung lowering upon the whole world has been removed. Through Jesus Christ, God has become every man's Friend. That is the reason why the holy angels sang even over His cradle: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, *good will toward men.*" Luke 2, 14 In Christ, God showed His good will toward all men.

2 Cor 5, 14 we read: *If One died for all, then were all dead.* By this precious statement the apostle means to say that, since Christ died, it is the same as if all men had suffered death for their sins, namely, the death which Christ died; it is the same as if all had atoned for their sins by their death. Now that the entire world has been redeemed and reconciled to God, is it not a horrible teaching to tell any person he may not believe that he has been reconciled and redeemed and has the forgiveness of sins? By that doctrine the completeness of redemption and reconciliation with God is shamefully denied.

Furthermore, this doctrine is contrary to the Gospel. After finishing the task of redemption and reconciliation, Christ said to His disciples: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." Mark 16, 15. to preach the Gospel means nothing else than bringing to every creature the glad tidings that they have been redeemed, that heaven is opened to all, that all are made righteous, that perfect righteousness has been brought to them by Christ, and that men are but to come and enter by the gate of righteousness even as they shall one day enter by the gate of eternal salvation. Is it not horrible to tell men that they may not believe this? Everybody is to know that the Gospel is for him, that God has had the glad tidings brought to him. For what purpose? In order that he may believe it and take comfort in it. If he refuses to believe it, he declares God and all His prophets and apostles liars. Is it not horrible to tell people who have learned by experience that they are poor, lost sinners and are still mired in sin, that, while God has indeed redeemed them, much remains still to be done on their part before they may believe and be actually redeemed? By this horrible teaching the sinner wants to share with God in the work of redemption. That is nothing short of blasphemy.

Nor does this harmonize with the fact that God has already declared in the presence of heaven and earth, of angels and men: "My Son has reconciled the world to Me. I have accepted His sacrifice. I am satisfied. He was your Surety, and I have set Him free. Therefore rejoice, for you have nothing to be afraid of." By the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead God has absolved the entire world of sinners from their sins. Is it not horrible for men to say that this

is indeed a fact, but that a person may not yet believe it? Does not that mean to charge God with lying and to deny the resurrection of Christ from the dead?

Furthermore, this teaching is also contrary to the doctrine of absolution. Christ says to His disciples, Matt 18, 18: "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." And in John 20, 23: "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained." He does not speak of certain qualities which persons must possess, but simply says: "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted"; "Whatsoever ye shall loose shall be loosed." Only a genuine Lutheran believes this; to all sects it is an abomination to hear it. They twist these precious words from the Mouth of Truth so that they are made to say something altogether; different from what they really do state. However, it is verily true, my friends, that Jesus Christ, after redeeming the entire world, has given His followers power to forgive everyone's sins. Some claim that the meaning of Christ is this: "When a minister notices that a person is in the proper condition, he may persuade him to believe that he has forgiveness of sins." But these are human imaginings; what the Lord says is simply this: "Thy sins are remitted." Moreover, this statement is readily comprehended by any one who believes in the completeness of the redemption and reconciliation with God which Christ accomplished.

To illustrate: Suppose a king has declared that a rebellious town has been granted full amnesty, and no one is to suffer for his sedition. In a case like that anybody can say: "The king has quelled the rebellion; he has conquered you rebels, but you can be of good cheer, because he has pardoned you. I know this for a certainty, because I myself heard the king say so." If the speaker, in addition, were to bring a document signed and sealed by the king which contained the same statement, everybody would rejoice and begin to celebrate the event. The situation is identical with the case now under discussion. By the resurrection of Christ, God has declared that He is reconciled with all mankind and does not intend to inflict punishment on anybody. He has this fact proclaimed in all the world by His Gospel and, in addition, has commanded every minister of the Gospel to forgive men their sins, promising that He will do in heaven what the minister is doing on earth. The minister is not first to look up to heaven to ascertain what God is doing. He is merely to execute His

orders on earth and forgive people's sins, relying on God's promise that He is forgiving them.

To some people this looks like a horrible doctrine, but it is the most comforting doctrine imaginable and is firmly established on the blood of God that was shed on the cross. Sin really has been forgiven, and all that God is now concerned about is that we believe this fact. We absolve men from their sins for no other purpose than to strengthen the faith of those who ask absolution in what they have heard proclaimed from the pulpit. Accordingly, none of them can say: "How can the minister know the condition of my heart? What is absolution to profit me when I am impenitent? Answer: "Indeed, in that case it is of no benefit, but it is of benefit when it is believed. However, this is certain that you have been absolved. Your eternal punishment will be all the more grievous because you did not believe the absolution which God Himself has pronounced to all sinners and which He has ordered His ministers to continue to pronounce to them."

This applies also to the Sacraments. The water in Baptism saves us. When the Lord offers communicants the blessed bread and says: "This is My body, which is given for you," It is plain that He means to tell them, they must believe, or His body will not benefit them. A person who believes that Christ, by sacrificing His body, has paid for the communicant's sins can leave the altar rejoicing and exulting. When the Lord, offering the cup, says: "This is My blood, which is shed for you, for the remission of sins," He means to emphasize particularly the words "for the remission of sins" and to cause every communicant who believes them to shout inwardly with joy when he goes home from church after communing.

Lastly, mistaking inability to believe for not being permitted to believe is contrary to the practice of the apostles. Whenever a person showed the mark of a poor sinner, they told him to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; they never asked him to wait until his condition had more fully developed. To his hearers on the first festival of Pentecost, Peter said that, while they had hated Christ, they were now believing in Him and should be baptized in His name. Remember also the instance of the jailer at Phillipi which I have adduced so often. Fanatics, unless they plead ignorance of the apostles' practice, object to that practice because they claim that they would preach people into carnal security and ultimately into hell by that method. Well, the blessed apostles, 'tis true, also had the sad experience of seeing that hypocrites had found their way

into their congregations. I shall merely point to the instance of Simon, the sorcerer. We are told: “Simon himself believed also,” Acts 8, 13, Namely, before the eyes of men, but he was revealed later as an altogether wicked man. That did not cause the apostles to become “more cautious” and to resolve not always to invite people to believe in the Lord Jesus. We find no evidence to that effect. For all the beautiful instances of sinners being invited by the apostles to believe immediately upon their confession sin of follow after the account of Simon, the sorcerer.

It is, likewise, great folly to appeal to one’s good intention. Pietists and many preachers among the Fanatics have reasoned that, to make the conversion of their hearers thorough, they must not allow them to appropriate what does not yet belong to them because it would prove false comfort to them. But this reasoning is a great piece of fanaticism. They ought to reflect that our heavenly Father is wiser than they. He knew very well that, when the consolations of the Gospel are imparted to all hearts, many will imagine that they, too, can believe them. But that is no reason why these consolations should be hushed up. We must not starve the children from fear that the dogs would get something of the children’s food, but we are cheerfully to proclaim the universal grace of God freely and leave it to God whether people will believe it or misapply it. When a trench has been dug for the erection of a very solid building the trench must not be kept open too long lest a rainstorm fill it up and all previous labor be lost. A good builder promptly lays the foundation in the trench. Now, the digging of the foundation takes place spiritually when men are convicted of their sins. That done, the Gospel must be promptly applied to their hearts, and the entire structure of Christianity must be reared upon that. Or take another illustration. When a physician has squeezed out an ulcer, he does not decide to wait two weeks before applying the soothing balm. He puts it on immediately, lest the wound become dangerously infected and prove deadly. When the ulcers of men’s sins have been squeezed out, the soothing balm of the Gospel must be applied immediately. That is the correct method, while that of the Methodists is wrong.

Let us now hear a few testimonies from *Luther’s* writings regarding this matter. He writes (St. L. Ed. XI, 1141): “While regarding the first kind of preaching, namely, that of the Law, is going on, men are filled with anxiety when they think of God and discover that they are damned with all their doings; they do not know what to do; their conscience becomes evil and timid, *and if no one comes to their rescue speedily, they have to*

despair. Therefore the other kind of preaching must not be delayed a long time: the Gospel must be preached to them; they must be brought to Christ, whom the Father has given us for our Mediator that we might be saved by Him from pure grace and mercy, without any works and merits of our own. That is what makes the heart cheerful; it hastens to this grace like a famished deer to the water. David felt that when in Ps 42, 1. 2, he wrote: ‘As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul thirstest for God, for the living God.’”

Many a person might have been saved, if the Gospel in its fullness had been preached to him immediately. Since it was not preached to him, he either gave himself over completely to despair, or he joined the world and decided that the Church was worthless.

In a sermon on Easter Sunday, *Luther* says (St. L. Ed. XII, 1586): “Now, then, the benefit of the suffering and resurrection of Christ is this: He did not undergo these things in His own behalf, but in behalf of the entire world: He trampled under foot the devil and my sin which on Good Friday were suspended on the cross together with Him, and the devil must now flee at the mention of the name of Christ. If you wish to make use of these great treasures, behold, He has already bestowed them on you as a gift. *Do but accord Him the honor of receiving them with thanks.*” Ponder this last statement: The gift has already been made; it is only for the sinner to accept it.

Again, *Luther* says in a sermon on Pentecost Monday (St. L. Ed. XI, 1104): “It is none of our doing and cannot be merited by our works; it has already been bestowed on us as a gift and handed over to us. All that is necessary is that you open you mouth, or rather your heart, and let God fill it. Ps 81, 10. That can be done in no other way than by your believing these words [”God so loved the world,” etc.], as you are here told that faith is required for appropriating this treasure in its entirety.” This is what is missing in all other churches: *They do not believe that redemption has been completely bestowed as a gift on all men.* They imagine that the Gospel is merely an instruction regarding what man must do in order to be reconciled with God after he has been reconciled by Christ. This is a self-contradiction.

Lastly, *Luther* writes (St. L. Ed. XI, 733 f.) “Accordingly, unbelief is nothing else than blasphemy and brands God a liar. For when I say to you: ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee in the name of God,’ and you do not believe it, your action is tantamount to saying: ‘Who knows whether it is true, whether

God really means what He says?’ If you do not believe, it would be better of you to be far removed from the Word of God. for God wants to have the preaching of His Word to be regarded as nothing less than His own preaching. Now, this is the authority which every Christian possesses as a gift from God. Of this matter I have spoken a great deal many times; therefore let this suffice.”

Most people, when they are being absolved, reason thus: “That is, indeed, very comforting, provided I know that I am in the proper condition to receive it.” Now, that is not at all what God wants, but after redemption has been acquired, He wants it communicated to all. The situation is exactly as if God were standing before us and were pronouncing absolution to us. What would we do if God were to manifest Himself to us as standing before us with life and death in His hands, calling us by name and saying: “Thy sins are forgiven thee”? With what joy would we depart from His presence and shout: “No devil shall make salvation unreliable to me!” Now, when a preacher absolves some one, *it is God who is doing that*. He does not want to deal with us immediately, but mediately. When hearing a Lutheran minister pronounce absolution, the sects imagine our doctrine to be that by his ordination a minister has received a mysterious power, a peculiar ability to look into men’s hearts. However, that is not what we teach, but we are absolving men whenever we preach the Gospel. The trouble is only that many are in the pews before us who do not believe our preaching and go home after the service as condemned and hardened sinners; but the children of God rejoice over the good sermon they have heard and return to their homes with the feeling that they have been eased from the burden of their sins.