

THIRTY-EIGHTH EVENING LECTURE.

(October 23, 1885.)

Many ministers, not all inefficient otherwise, imagine that they have accomplished much, in fact, that they have achieved their aim, when they have roused their hearers from their carnal security and reduced them to a state of mind where they despair of their being in a state of grace and of their salvation. It is, indeed, necessary that every person who is to be saved by brought out of his false security, false comfort, false peace, and false hopes. He must, indeed, be made to despair of salvation and of his present condition. But that is merely a preparatory stage through which he must pass; it is not the matter of chief importance nor the chief aim that is to be achieved with regard to him. The principal matter is that he attain to full assurance of his state of grace and his salvation, so that he may exult, as a pardoned sinner, with the godly poet Woltersdorf and sing: —

I know, yes, I know, and shall e'er be maintaining,
That, as sure as God's hands in His Kingdom are reigning,
As sure as his sun does the heavens adorn,
His pardon for sinners to me has been borne.

That such is the principal aim of an evangelical minister there can be no doubt. For the minister must preach the Gospel to those entrusted to him; he must bring them to faith in Christ, baptize them, and administer absolution and the Lord's Supper to them. However, preaching the Gospel means nothing else than telling men that they have been reconciled, perfectly reconciled, with God by Christ. Living, genuine faith of the heart means nothing else than the divine assurance that one has the forgiveness of sins and that the gates of heaven are open to him. Baptizing a person means nothing else than taking him out of the world of lost sinners, by the command and in the name and place of God, and giving him the solemn assurance that God is gracious to him, that God is his Father, and that he, the baptized person, is God's child; that the Son of God is his Savior and the baptized his child and already saved; that the Holy Spirit is his comforter and the baptized an abode of the Holy Spirit. Administering absolution to a person means nothing else than saying to him by the command and in the name and place of Christ: "Thy sins are forgiven thee." Administering Holy Communion means nothing else than saying to him in the name of Jesus: "You, too, are to share in the great achievement of redemption. To confirm

your claim on it, this precious pledge is given you, namely, the body and blood of Christ, the ransom with which He purchased the entire world.”

An examination of the Scriptures reveals the fact that the aim of all true ministers has been to train their hearers so that they could declare themselves children of God and heirs of salvation. When Christ said to His disciples: “Rejoice because your names are written in heaven,” Luke 10, 20, He evidently called upon them to rejoice in the certainty of their salvation. Paul writes to the Corinthians: ‘Ye are washed, ye are sanctified, ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.’ I Cor 6, 11 Peter writes to the Christians living in the dispersion: “Ye were as sheep going astray; but ye are now returned unto the shepherd and Bishop of your souls.” I Pet 2, 25. John says to his spiritual children, including himself in the statement: “Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is.” I John 3, 2. Nowhere in the Holy Scriptures do we find the apostles treating the members of the congregations as if they were uncertain regarding their standing with God; their treatment of them is always such that one can see they presuppose that their members, in spite of their weaknesses and blemishes, are dear, beloved children of God.

Conditions are different in our time. As a rule, even the best ministers are well satisfied if they have trained their people to come to them occasionally and complain that they have no assurance of their salvation, that they are afraid they would be lost if they were to die the next night. A complaint like this alarms a truly evangelical minister whose aim is to get his hearers to profess: “I know that my Redeemer lives. I know in whom I have believed.” But ministers who are not truly evangelical take this complaint as evidence that they have made good Christians out of their hearers.

What is the reason that so many in our day live in uncertainty about their being true Christians? The reason is that ministers, as a rule, confounding Law and Gospel and do not heed the apostolic admonition: “Study to show thyself a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.” 2 Tim 2, 15 For when the Gospel is preached with an admixture of law, it is impossible for a hearer to attain to faith in the forgiveness of his sins. On the other hand, when the Law is preached with an admixture of Gospel, it is impossible for a hearer to arrive at the knowledge that he is a poor sinner in need of the forgiveness of sins.

Thesis XXIV.

In the twentieth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the unforgiven sin against the Holy Ghost is described in a manner as if it could not be forgiven because of its magnitude.

This current description of the unpardonable sin is a horrid confounding of Law and Gospel.

Only the Law condemns sin; the Gospel absolves the sinner from all sins without an exception. The prophet writes; “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white a snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Is 1, 18. The Apostle Paul writes, Rom 5, 20: “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” Accordingly, Luther sings out in a glorious strain: —

Though great our sins and sore our woes,
His grace much more boundeth;
His helping love no limit knows,
Our utmost need it soundeth.

Now, then, what does Holy Scripture say regarding the sin against the Holy Ghost? Concerning this sin we have three parallel passages in the synoptic gospels, a passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and one in the First Epistle of St. John. These passages are the real seat of doctrine for the sin against the Holy Ghost.

Matt. 12, 30–32: *He that is not with Me is against Me, and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth abroad. Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.* This is the principal passage. It states, to begin with, that all blasphemy against the Father and the Son shall be forgiven; only the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven. Now, it is certain that the Holy Spirit is not a more glorious and exalted person than the Father and the Son, but He is coequal with them. Accordingly, the meaning of this passage cannot be that the unforgivable sin is blasphemy against the person of the Holy Spirit; for blasphemy against the Father and the Son is exactly the same sin. The blasphemy to which our text refers is directed *against the office*, or operation of the Holy Spirit; whoever spurns the office of the Holy Spirit, his sin cannot be forgiven. The office of the Holy Spirit is to call men to Christ and to keep them with Him.

The text mentions in particular, that the person committing this sin “*speake*th against the Holy Ghost”. This shows that the sin in question is not committed by blasphemous thoughts that arise in the heart. Not infrequently dear Christians imagine they have committed this sin when they are visited with horrid thoughts of which they cannot rid themselves. Our Lord Christ foresaw this, and for that reason He informed us that the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost that is not forgiven must have been uttered by the mouth. The devil shoots his fiery darts into the hearts of the best Christians, causing them to revolve in their hearts the most horrible thoughts against their heavenly Father and against the Holy Spirit, however, against their will. Earnest Christians have complained that, while going to Communion, they have been harassed with the most horrible thoughts against the Holy Ghost. Such thoughts are the devil’s filth. When I am sitting in a beautiful room with windows open and a bad boy throws dirt into the room, I am not responsible for this. In His wise providence God permits His dear children to be vexed day and night with such thoughts. The best preachers have met with such instances among the members of their congregations. But that is not the sin against the Holy Ghost, which consists in blasphemy that is pronounced orally.

I have had to treat spiritually a girl who even uttered thoughts of this kind, but at the same time fell on the ground, weeping and moaning to be delivered from her affliction by God. She did not come to rest until she realized that it was not she that was uttering those thoughts. Satan had taken possession of her lips. of course, Modernists, who deny such power of the devil, call this explanation a superstitious notion.

Mark 3, 28–30: *Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blasphemed; but he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost has never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation; because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.* Here we have the record of an actual blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. When Christ, by the finger of God, cast out devils, the Pharisees, who had come down from Jerusalem, declared this operation of the Holy Spirit a work of the devil. They were convinced in their hearts that it was a divine work, but since the Saviour had rebuked them for their hypocrisy and mien of sanctimoniousness they conceived a deadly hatred against Christ, and that incited them to blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.

Accordingly we have here this explanation offered us: to declare a *work* of the Holy Ghost a work of the devil when one is convinced that it is a work of the Holy Ghost, that is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. This shows us what a serious matter this is. There are no Christians that do not occasionally resist the operations of divine grace and then try to persuade themselves that they were only chasing away gloomy thoughts. Does this mean anything but that such thoughts are of the devil? The doctrine now before us warns us that, if we wish to be saved, we must yield promptly to the operation of the Holy Spirit as soon as we feel it and not resist it. For in the next stage the person who resists may find himself saying: “This operation is not by the Holy Spirit.” The following stage will be that he begins to hate the way by which God wants to lead him to salvation, and ultimately he will blaspheme that way. Accordingly, let us be on our guard. Let us open the door to the Holy Spirit whenever He knocks and not take the view of worldly men who regard these sensations as symptom of melancholia.

This is not a jesting matter; for unless the Holy Spirit brings us to faith, we shall never attain it. Whoever rejects the Holy Spirit is beyond help, even by God. God wants the order maintained which he has ordained for our salvation. He brings no one into heaven by force. On the occasion to which our text refers Christ had just healed the man with the withered hand and had driven out a devil. Everybody saw that the power of God was making an inroad into the kingdom of Satan. But the reprobates who stood by said: “Ah! Beelzebub is in this Jesus; that is why He can cast out inferior devils.” The very action which they had witnessed, the works and the words of Christ, showed that He was arrayed against the devil and was destroying the devil’s kingdom. It was wholly out of reason to imagine that the devil would help Christ in that work.

Luke 12, 10: *Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven.* Again we see that it is essential to the sin against the Holy Ghost that the blasphemy is *uttered*, and that, *knowingly and purposely*.

We have a very important statement regarding this sin in Heb 6, 4–8: *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost and have tasted of the good Word of God and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall*

away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame. For the earth that drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed receiveth blessing from God; but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned. It is characteristic of the sin against the Holy Ghost that *the person who has committed it cannot be restored to repentance.* That is simply impossible. It is not God who puts man into this condition, but the sinner by his own fault produces this state of irretrievable impenitence. When this condition has reached a certain degree, God ceases to operate upon him, and there is no further possibility for the person to be saved. Why? Because he cannot be induced to repent. The soil of his heart has been finally blasted and is no longer fructified by the dew and rain of divine grace.

1 John 5, 16: *If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and He shall give him life for them that sin not unto death.* THERE IS SIN UNTO DEATH. I DO NOT SAY THAT HE SHALL PRAY FOR IT. This passage contains important information for us, but we cannot act upon it. For we can say of no person before his death that he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. Even when his mouth utters blasphemies, we do not know to what extent his heart is implicated, or whether the phenomenon is not perhaps an operation of the devil, or whether he is acting in great blindness, and whether he may not be renewed unto repentance. The Christians in the days of the apostles had the gift to discern the spirits. Accordingly, St. John here means to say: “When you see that God has ceased to be gracious to such or such an individual who has committed this sin, you are not to wish either that God should be gracious to him, and you are to cease praying for him.” Neither may we say to God: “Save those who have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost.”

This is a shocking statement, and yet it contains a great comfort. Some one may come to you and say: “I am a wretched man — I have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. I am quite certain of it.” The afflicted may tell you of the evil he has done, the evil he has *spoken*, and the evil he has thought. It may really look as if he had blasphemed against the Holy Ghost. Now remember the weapon which Heb 6 furnishes for attacking a case like this: “The person is

not at all rejoicing over what he tells you; it is all so awfully horrid to him. This shows that God has at least begun to lead him to repentance; all that he need do is to lay hold of the promise of the Gospel. When you ask him whether he has been doing all those evil things intentionally, he may affirm that involuntarily because Satan makes him affirm the question. When you ask him whether he wishes he had not done those evil things, he will answer: "Yes, indeed; these things are causing me to most awful worry." That is a sure sign that God has begun the work of repentance in that person. A case like this is indeed not to be treated lightly; the sufferer must be shown that, since there is in him the beginning of repentance he has an indubitable proof that he has not committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. In general, when preaching on this subject, the minister must aim at convincing his hearers that they have not committed this sin rather than warn them not to commit it. To a person who has really committed this sin preaching is of no benefit. Whoever is sorry for his sins and craves forgiveness should be told that he is a dear child of God, but is passing through a terrible tribulation.

Acts 7, 51 we read that Stephen said to his hearers: "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumscised in heart and ears, *ye do always resist the Holy Ghost*; as your fathers did, so do ye." Had these people committed the sin against the Holy Ghost? No; for Stephen died praying for them: "Lord lay not this sin to their charge" V. 60. This shows that, although the Jews had committed wilful sins, they had not committed the sin against the Holy Ghost; otherwise the martyr would not have prayed for them. He was, when praying for them, thinking that an hour might come when they would no longer resist the Holy Ghost.

Let us now hear *Luther's* comment on 1 John 5, 16. He writes (St. Louis Ed. IX, 1519): "By the term 'sin unto death' I understand heresy which these people set up in the place of the truth. If they do not repent after the first and second admonition (Titus 3, 10), their sin is a sin unto death. However, we may number with this class such as sin from stubbornness and defiance, like Judas, who had been given ample warning, but because of his obstinate wickedness was beyond help; also Saul, who died in his sins because he would not trust in the Lord. But the highest degree of obstinancy is found in those who insist on maintaining and defending their known error."

The sin is not unpardonable because of its magnitude, — for the apostle, as we heard, has distinctly declared: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more

abound,“ — but because the person committing this sin rejects the only means by which he can be brought to repentance, faith, and steadfastness in faith. Luther here refers to men whose sin consists in this, that they obstinately defend against their better knowledge and conscience an error which they have recognized as such.

Luther continues: “Of this kind is also the sin against the Holy Ghost, or hardening in wickedness, fighting against the known truth, and final impenitence.”

It is undoubtedly incorrect to regard impenitence unto the end as the sin against the Holy Ghost, as Luther does; for in that case most men would have committed this sin. However, final impenitence is a feature of this sin. The special peculiarity of this sin is that it opposes the *office*, the operation, of the Holy Ghost.

To return to Luther: “There is another kind of sin which is not unto death. Of this kind was the sin of Paul, to which he refers in 1 Tim 1, 13, saying: ‘I was before a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.’” Paul had committed the awful sin of blaspheming and trying to force Christians to blaspheme; but he was acting in appalling blindness: he had no inkling that he was fighting against God. “Of this sin Christ speaks in Matt 12, 32, saying: ‘Whoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him.’ Likewise, the sin of the men who crucified Christ was not unto death, for Peter says to them: ‘And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it.’ Acts 3, 17. And Paul says; ‘Had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory.’ 1 Cor. 2, 8. However, this sin is unto death when it is defended after having been sufficiently revealed and recognized as a sin, because it resists the grace of God, the means of grace, and the forgiveness of sin. Where there is no knowledge of sin, there is no forgiveness. For the forgiveness of sin preached to those who feel their sin and are seeking the grace of God. *But these persons* [who have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost] *are not frightened by any scruples of conscience*, nor do they recognize and feel their sin.”

Let every one beware of resisting the Holy Ghost. When a sin has been revealed to him and his own heart affirms that it is a sin, let not his mouth deny the fact. That may not yet be the sin against the Holy Ghost, but it may be a step in that direction. There are many people who admit that we all sin in

many ways every day, but when they are reprov'd, they claim that they never harmed a child.

As regards people who are distressed because they think they have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, they would not feel distressed if they really had committed that sin and were in that awful condition of heart, but they would find their constant delight in blaspheming the Gospel. However, Christians in distress still have faith, and the Spirit of God is working in them; and if the Spirit of God is working in them, they have not committed the sin against the Holy Ghost.

An excellent exposition of this matter is found in *Baier's Latin Compend of Positive Theology*. He says in Part II, Chap III §24: "The most grievous of all actual sins, which is called the sin against the Holy Ghost,^{a)} consists^{b)} in a malicious renunciation^{d)} and blasphemous^{e)} and obstinate^{f)} assaults upon the heavenly truth which had once upon a time been known^{c)} by the person committing this sin.

"a) The manner of denominating this sin thus is derived from its object, which is the Holy Ghost. The term 'Holy Ghost' in this place is understood *metonymically*; it stands for the office which the Holy Ghost discharges in converting the souls of men by the ministry of the Word. This meaning of the term is also found in 2 Cor 3, 6. The sin against the Holy Ghost, then, is a sin which is committed *against the office and ministry of the Holy Ghost and against the heavenly truth which is revealed by that office and ministry*. [To blaspheme the Holy Ghost means to blaspheme His ministry, to declare the operations of the Holy Ghost operations of the devil, and to offer resistance to His office.] It is also called a sin unto death, this denomination being derived from the effect of this sin, because it leads quite definitely to eternal death, or damnation. I John 5, 16. ["Sin unto death" must not be confused with "mortal sin."]

"b) The seat of doctrine for this sin is found in Matt 12, 30 ff; Mark 3, 28; Luke 12, 10.

"c) The doctrine of heavenly truth may either have been approved once upon a time with an assent of divine faith and by public profession, or it may have only been perceived so clearly that the heart of the individual was convinced and had no argument to set up against it. In the former manner the sin against the Holy Ghost is committed by those apostles who renounce and vilify the truth which they had once known and believed, such as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes in 'chapter 6, 4 ff. In the latter class belong the Pharisees and scribes, who never approved the doctrine of Christ by their profession, although they were convinced of its truth in their heart by the Scripture and the miracles of Christ, and had nothing but calumnies to set up against it. [There are Lutheran theologians who claim that only a truly regenerate person can commit the sin against the Holy Ghost. But that is going too far; for nobody will believe the Pharisees to whom the Lord speaks of this sin had been truly converted at some previous time; they had simply grown up in their wickedness. It is true, however, that a person can commit this sin even after his regeneration, a fact that is to be maintained over against the Calvinists. It is probable the Judas had been a believer. One can scarcely

believe that the Savior would have called him while he was under the wrath of God. Judas fell away later, and Satan took possession not only of his body, but also of his mind.]

“d) In other words, the renunciation of, and assaults upon, the heavenly doctrine must be made ἐκούσιως, ‘wilfully’. Heb 10, 26 in such a manner that the source of this renunciation and assault is pure, downright malice. However, those who renounce their faith from ignorance or fear of death are not on that account sinners against the Holy Ghost, but can obtain remission of their sin. See the examples of Paul in 1 Tim 1, 13, and of Peter in Matt 26, 70 ff. [When the Word of God has been clearly and plainly presented to a person and it is evident that he has been impressed by it, because he is abashed, he begins to tremble, and feels that God is approaching him, it is a shocking thing in such a case to hear the person saying: “No, I do not believe that! I do not believe that! You misinterpret Scripture!”] That may not be the sin against the Holy Ghost, but it is a step in that direction. I say, a step in that direction; for the person may reconsider this act and be saved. Peter had taken three steps towards the sin against the Holy Ghost; however, he acted not from hatred against Christ, but from fear. He expected to be put in prison if he were to admit that he was a disciple of Jesus. That fear of Peter gave the devil an opportunity to overthrow this great and solid pillar of the Church. But the Holy Spirit reentered the heart of Peter, and Peter repented of his sin.

“e) In the passages cited under b) this sin is called ‘speaking a word against the Holy Ghost.’ or ‘blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.’ Accordingly, the form which this sin takes is a reviling talk that is aimed against the office of the Holy Spirit, for instance, when His teaching and the wonderful works that were performed in support of it are ascribed to the power and operation of Satan, as was done by the Pharisees.

“f) Accordingly, it is in its very nature a sin of such a character that it cannot be forgiven, and never is forgiven to any one, according to the passages in Matthew and Mark, because by its very nature it blocks the way to repentance. The reason, however, why final impenitence is so closely connected with this sin is that the men who commit it directly and with full malice oppose the means for their conversion and that God therefore withdraws His grace from them and gives them over to a reprobate mind.”

A person who has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost is condemned not so much on account of this sin as rather on account of his unbelief. Unbelief is the general cause (*causa communis*) and malicious and constant vilification of the truth the particular cause (*causa singularis*), of his damnation. It is not due to an absolute decree of reprobation, as the Calvinists teach, who maintain the really diabolical error that such men cannot be saved for the reason that Christ did not suffer and atone for their sins and did not redeem them.

There is a current opinion that a certain Spiera had committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. He had come to know the evangelical truth, but renounced it twice, the second time under oath. He got into an awful condition of mind: everybody could see that he was suffering the torments of hell. All attempts to comfort him failed. Paul Vergerious attended him in his illness and ministered the consolation of the Gospel to him. However, all our theologians hold that Spiera

did not commit the sin against the Holy Ghost because he condemned that sin and was fully convinced that he had merited eternal perdition. His sin was despair of the mercy of God. Moreover, the reason why Spiera renounced the truth was that he feared he would be burned by the Romanists.

Quenstedt's account of Spiera is cited in Baier's *Compend*, part II, p. 328.

The case of Spiera is an important, solemn warning for all time. It furnished Vergerius the final impulse for quitting the Papacy when he beheld the infernal agony which a person had to suffer who had renounced the evangelical truth.