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## CONTENTS

Sermons to Seminarians (conclusion)	David Lau
The Interaction of the Son of Man With Individual Classes and Persons	William Henkel
The Proper Use of the Gospel Among Us	Michael J. Roehl

## BOOK REVIEWS

<i>Gospel Motivation—More Than “Jesus Died for My Sins”</i>	By Robert J. Koester
<i>Handling the Word of Truth—Law and Gospel in the Church Today</i>	By John T. Pless
<i>The Psalms—A Devotional Commentary</i>	By Carl Manthey Zorn

(Reviewer: David Lau)

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## SERMONS TO SEMINARIANS

David Lau

Homiletics Sermon #9 (Fall 2004): Luke 10:38-42

**Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."**

Dear seminary students in the service of our Savior:

It is clear right from the start that our Lord Jesus by means of this text is not teaching us that listening to His Word is good and right, but serving Him is wrong and bad. On the contrary, He is teaching that both listening to His Word is good and serving Him is good, but one has priority over the other.

Your life as seminary students is full of opportunities to establish and maintain priorities. In fact, it is altogether necessary to establish priorities for ourselves and live by them. For example, let us say that you have three hours of available time this evening. What are you going to do with those three hours? Whether you are a family man or not, it may be that your job, which you need to pay for your schooling and other expenses, requires that you go out and earn a living this evening. You can't lie, call in sick, and stay at home. So your employment is your priority, at least for tonight. Or maybe you have an exegetical paper due for one of your classes tomorrow. If you spend three hours working on that paper, you can finish it and hand it in when it is due. On the other hand, there are those pages you need to read for another class, and you have not begun to do that. Actually, you would prefer to do the reading, because it is a subject of great interest to you.

Let's not forget other areas of interest that call for your attention. There's that television show which has been highly advertised, and you feel the need to keep up with what is going on in the entertainment world, right? And what about the anticipated televised debate between the two presidential contenders? And so it goes, day after day, hour after hour. Decisions need to be made as to how you are going to spend your time, how you are going to spend your money, and how you are going to keep the people around you happy.

Our text may not be able to settle the question of what to do with those three hours this evening, but it certainly should determine for us important priorities for the long run. Here our **LORD JESUS ESTABLISHES THE PROPER PRIORITIES** *for every one of His followers*, and thus also *for pastors of the flock and preachers of the Word*, which you are hoping to become in the very near future. May the Holy Spirit help us to learn and apply what our Lord is teaching to all those who follow Him.

The background of our text is rather simple. Jesus has been on His travels out of Galilee, making His way south toward Jerusalem, where He would eventually enter the holy city for the last time (Luke 9:51). Although the twelve apostles are not mentioned, they might have been with Him at this particular time (Luke 10:38). Jesus has arrived in the village of Bethany near Jerusalem, where He entered the home of His good friend Martha, sister of Mary and their brother Lazarus. Jesus loved this

family (John 11:5), and they loved Him. On this occasion it seems that Martha wanted to make a meal for Jesus. So after welcoming Him into her house, she became rather busy, scurrying about, getting everything ready. No doubt, she had many things to do at the last moment, and she could have really used some help. After all, her visitor was Jesus of Nazareth, the Prophet of God, whom she loved and honored greatly.

However, while Martha was active in getting everything ready for her important Friend, her sister Mary was just sitting there, apparently doing nothing but having a conversation with Jesus, listening to what He had to say. Now consider what we might call people like Mary, who just sit there and take things in, allowing themselves to be entertained by someone else. In certain settings we may call such people “couch potatoes,” that is, passive, lazy people, letting others do all the work, while they just sit there and do little or nothing.

As the minutes went by and Mary kept on sitting there at Jesus’ feet, Martha was getting upset by all the work she had to do. She was feeling the pressure of wanting to do an excellent job without having the cooperation of her sister. The moment finally came when she could not take it anymore. As we hear in the words of our text: **“Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Jesus and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.’”**

I think Martha expected Jesus to utter a kind of apology to her for monopolizing the attention of Mary and then do what she asked Him to do: tell Mary to help her. Martha’s priority was clear at the moment; serving Jesus at this particular time was the most important thing she could possibly do. She did call Him “Lord,” and no doubt, there was more in her expression than simply addressing Him as “Sir.” What could be more important than preparing a meal for Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Savior?

Undoubtedly, Martha was at first shocked by Jesus’ reply. **“Martha, Martha,”** He said, **“you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.”** The account of Luke ends at this point; so we don’t know for sure what followed. But we can well imagine that Martha soon caught on to what Jesus was telling her. He was establishing clear priorities for her and every one of His followers. If there is a choice between doing something for Jesus and having Him do something for us, then what He wants to give us and do for us is much more important than anything we can do for Him. **“One thing is needed,”**

Jesus said. What is that one thing? Certainly it is sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to His Word. Mary had made a good choice when she decided to listen to Jesus rather than to help her sister, and Jesus, for one, was not going to take away from her the privilege of listening to Him.

The very first Psalm establishes the same order of priorities. **“Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.”** Whatever time of the day or evening we set aside for listening to Jesus, reading His Word, and meditating on it, that is both quality time and priority time. We should not let other things distract us or deter us from using that time for the very purpose of hearing what Jesus has to say. It is our way today of sitting at His feet and listening to Him speak. This does not mean that we can’t spend some time also serving Him by other activities in our lives. We notice also in the first Psalm that the same blessed man who delights in hearing the Word of God and meditating on it day and night also brings forth fruit in his life, because he is **“like a tree planted by the rivers of water”** and **“whatever he does shall prosper.”** Hearing the Word leads him to bring forth the fruit God wants, and so he prospers by doing things, good things, useful things. But the first priority remains: one of delighting in His Word and listening to what the Lord has to say.

Think of the early Christians in Jerusalem. What was their priority in those early days, as they found themselves gathered into the flock of Christ? The book of Acts tells us: **“And they continued**

**steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers"** (Acts 2:42). They were happy to spend a great deal of time just sitting there, listening to the teaching of the twelve apostles as they enlarged on the wonderful plan of God's salvation, which had come to fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They soaked it all in, just like Mary had done before them.

This same Mary, who so attentively had listened to her Lord on that day, later was present at another meal, where she **"took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair"** (John 12:3). Here she was doing something for Jesus; she was serving Him. And Jesus was happy with what she had done. In fact, He defended her when others found fault with her actions, since she had spent so much money on this ointment. But you see, it was because Mary had so carefully listened to Jesus that she was much ahead of the others in her understanding of what Jesus was about to do. She knew that Jesus was going to die and be buried, and she wanted to anoint His body in advance for His burial.

By listening to Jesus' teaching, we also come to an understanding of who He is and what He has done for us. What can be more important for us than this? That is why Jesus has established listening to His Word as the top priority. It is through that Word and listening to that Word that He channels to us the most precious of spiritual blessings—forgiveness of sins and eternal life—as well as the nurturing of our faith that clings to these blessings.

If listening to Jesus' Word is the top priority for every disciple of Jesus, then it must also be the top priority **for pastors of the Lord's flock and preachers of His Word**. This is true for us in two ways. First of all, it must be top priority for every pastor to listen to what Jesus has to say about any situation or problem. People will come to you with their problems, their woes, their sins. Will you be wise enough to know what to say to each of them on the basis of your experience? Hardly. The pastor who has the responsibility of feeding his flock also has the necessity of feeding himself on the rich, satisfying pasture of God's Word. He has to be a receiver before he can be a giver. He has to take in what Jesus has to say to him before he can give out what Jesus has to say to others.

Secondly, when he is functioning as a pastor, he is fulfilling the same role as Jesus did in our text, that is, when the Marys and Marthas and Lazaruses in his congregation come to sit at his feet, because he is their pastor. What, then, is he going to give them as their pastor? He is going to give to them what Jesus has given to him: the message of salvation, first of all, and then, of course, all the other things that Jesus has taught him. This he will do as an ambassador of Christ, representing Christ to his members.

The apostles in the early church in Jerusalem had to establish priorities for themselves as apostles. The congregation was growing. There was a need for food distribution to the poor. The apostles were in charge of the whole operation, but some of the work was not being done well, and there were complaints. At that point the apostles might have decided that the administration of gifts to the poor was their highest priority, and everything else had to become secondary. But according to the book of Acts, they established a different priority: **"It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables"** (Acts 6:2). Others were appointed to take care of the other needs. For them it was established as the highest priority that they would give themselves **"continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word"** (v. 4).

Just as listening to Jesus' Word is the highest priority for every disciple of Jesus, so the highest priority for every pastor of the flock is to feed his flock with Jesus' teachings, after he himself has first been fed. The top priority of every preacher of the Word is, first of all, to listen to the Word for his own spiritual needs and then preach that Word to others—to his congregation and, in fact, to everyone in the whole world, as he has opportunity.

As students in this seminary you want to learn how to present Jesus' Word to others, both in counseling

situations as pastors, in instruction classes as teachers, and in the pulpit as preachers. We have courses in the seminary that help you learn how to do these things. But we also spend a great deal of time in the seminary

sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to His teachings. Is this not what we do in our exegetical and isagogical classes? Is this not what we do in our morning and evening chapels? We hear and read His Word. We study His Word and meditate on it. We have our own personal sins dealt with, as Jesus tells us in many different ways who He is and what He has done for us, how He lived and died for us and rose again so that we may have life.

Sinners that we are, we need to hear His teaching of law and gospel over and over again for the sake of our own salvation. This Word is and remains the one thing needful for us, just as it was for Mary. Then, after giving priority to the hearing of God's Word, especially the good news of our Savior, we can also serve like Martha, out of love for our Savior who first loved us. Amen.

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## **The Interaction of the Son of Man With Individual Classes and Persons**

William Henkel

\* The following translation of "Der Umgang des Menschensohns mit einzelnen Menschenklassen und Personen" (*Theologische Quartalschrift*, 23:3, July 1926, pages 169-185) is the last to appear in this series. Considering the scope of content originally stated in the first installment (*Journal*, 45:4, p. 40) and also judging from the title above, it appears that Prof. Henkel had more material in mind, but was not able to finish the series as intended.<sup>1</sup>

We next want to bring into view that interaction of the Son of Man with the children of men which took the least friendly form: **His interaction with the elite of the Jewish church, its teachers and officials.**<sup>2</sup>

One would think that no interaction of Jesus with the children of men would have taken a more friendly form than this one. No other class of men in Israel, one would think, would have so properly treasured the Teacher come from God [John 3:2] and known how to appreciate Him than the heads of the church: the scribes and the Pharisees, the priesthood and the Sanhedrin. Because of their calling they must have known better than anyone the hope of Israel and the image, clearly drawn by Moses and the prophets, of Him in whom this hope should be realized. And was it not they who, in the evil times which had come upon the people of God, sought to revive among the people that fading image of the Champion to whom the nations should cling and to enliven anew their Messianic hopes. They were called to teach the people. However, if they did that according to the example of their fathers (instead of speaking about things which truly satisfy the heart) and thus spoke of forbidden and permitted foods, the cleansing of dishes, hand washings, the prescribed breadth of phylacteries, postures taken during prayer, and similar external matters, would not their calling necessarily have become unbearable to them? Would not their own teaching activity have disgusted them and an ardent desire for something better—spirit and life instead of dead form—have made itself felt?

And now He stands before them, of whom Moses and the prophets had prophesied, whom all the godly fathers had longingly awaited, in whom Israel and all the world should experience salvation. Could it have been difficult for them to recognize Him? He certainly left no one the impression that He was a man like all others. He needed only to open His mouth for everyone to notice that He is no child of His

time or of any other time. Even as they who heard Him had recognized, never had a man ever spoken like this One had (John 7:46). He received His wisdom neither from the ancients nor from the moderns. No particular age had left its impression on His words, and yet they are timeless in their significance and validity, equally important for the first people as for the final descendant of Adam. His words do not deal with empty forms and meaningless externals, but with humanity's greatest good and the ultimate questions, upon whose answer it depends whether it is a happiness or an affliction to be a human. Must not such a Teacher attract the attention of the scribes and Pharisees and compel precisely their admiration?

Not only did He speak as no one had ever spoken before, but He also did what no one could do, unless the power of God dwells in and is mighty in him. His miracles were unprecedented in Israel and corresponded to those described in the prophecies of the Messiah. Wouldn't it, then, have to be easy for the teachers and officials of the Jewish church to recognize God's Anointed in Him? And did not Nicodemus, speaking for himself and for his colleagues, say to Him, "Master, we know that You are a Teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs which You do, unless God is with Him" [John 3:2]? Would not one expect the teachers and leaders of the Jewish people, before all others and in great numbers, to be pleased with the Son of Man?

One would also think that Jesus would seek interaction with the teachers and officials of the church more than with anyone else. It would surely have been His desire to gain close contact with the leaders of the people. He would surely have wanted to explain His person and mission to them more than to anyone else. They, whom God had placed as guardians over the house of Israel and so were responsible to Him for all their souls, certainly could lay a claim on Jesus that He make them aware of and try to convince them of His divine mission. They could also clear away for Him many stones from the path and bring the people to Him in crowds.

### **The beginning of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders**

Jesus, however, had dealings with the elite of the Jewish church less than with anyone else, and none of His other associations brought forth so little fruit as this one did. Soon after His first public appearance, already in the first year of His teaching activity, the relationship between Him and them was strained. True, we know very little about His first year of teaching, and part of that (John reports it in the first three chapters of his Gospel) did not take place in Judea, nor in Jerusalem, the stronghold of Judaism, but in Galilee, where He could not have easily come into conflict with the sect of the Pharisees or the band of scribes. Nevertheless, even before the end of His first year of preaching, an unmistakable opposition arose between Him and them. Soon after His baptism in the Jordan, John had led a few of his own disciples to Him. Jesus went with them to the wedding in Cana of Galilee and returned with them to Jerusalem for the Passover. Here with the cleansing of the temple, it appears that the first public clash between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees took place. John tells us that the Jews (and by "the Jews" he certainly meant the leaders of the Jews) had called Him to account for the temple cleansing. They asked, "What do You show us as a sign, since You dare do such a thing?" He answered, "Tear down this temple, and on the third day I will raise it up." They replied in indignation, "This temple was built in 46 years, and You want to raise it up in three days?" (John 2:18-20). Thus they go their separate ways; the contradiction is there.

Soon Nicodemus indeed came to Him, a respected member of their group, who sincerely sought the truth; he allowed himself to be taught by Him and remained faithful to Him. But he came as a private individual, not in the name of his colleagues, not on behalf of the Sanhedrin. After the conversation with Nicodemus Jesus appears to have remained yet for a time in Jerusalem, or in any case in Judea,

and to have gained a comparatively large multitude of followers. And then John reports: “Therefore when the Lord knew that it had been told to the Pharisees that He made and baptized more disciples than John . . . He left the country of Judea and departed again to Galilee” (John 4:1-3). That can only really mean that when the Pharisees saw that Jesus had even more disciples than John and daily gained new followers, they determined to make an end of this dangerous activity. Then Jesus, not wishing to bring the conflict to a head, left Judea and went back to Galilee. The relationship between them had not improved since then. The opposition had become more glaring, and to all appearances it could no longer be settled.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the first sermon which Matthew reports as an example of His Galilean teaching activity, Jesus already turns openly against the scribes and Pharisees, mentioning them by name. He passes a devastating judgment on their piety and says, “If your righteousness is not better than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” [Matt. 5:20]. Then through individual examples He points out how shallow, how superficial, how lifeless, how misleading their teaching is. From then on His opposition toward them, in His whole walk of life, becomes more and more glaring, and the damage seems beyond repair.

In the final week before His suffering, almost every sermon He preaches to the dignitaries of the Jewish church is a pronouncement of judgment. In the parables of the two sons sent by their father into the vineyard, of the king who held a wedding for his son, and of the wicked husbandmen, He announces to them that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and given to others. Then follows an eight-fold woe pronounced upon them. He calls them blind, blind guides, hypocrites, white-washed tombs, serpents, and a brood of vipers. He reminds them of the blood-guiltiness pressing on them from the time of their forefathers and speaks of a new guilt which they would load upon themselves. He announces to them that their house would be left to them desolate and that God’s judgment of wrath would soon completely crush them (Matt. 21-23).

### **The cause and result of this conflict**

How did it happen that Jesus’ interaction with the elite of the Jewish church turned out this way and had such a result? Did Jesus provoke their opposition deliberately? Mindful of the prophecy that the Stone which God appointed to be the cornerstone of the Church would be rejected by the Jewish builders [Ps. 118:22], did He make no effort to win them, but rather intended from the very beginning to become a stumbling block to them and an offense against which they needed to be smashed? Such thoughts come easily if one pictures for himself how Jesus, almost from the beginning, presented Himself to them. That He did not turn first to them and inform them of His divine mission and explain about His Person—this really cannot surprise us. He could give witness of His divine mission to them in no other way than to the people. And the people should not be won to Him through the authority of their leaders, but through His preaching. “Whoever is of God hears God’s Word.” “My sheep hear My voice.” “Whoever is of the truth hears My voice” [John 8:47, 10:27, 18:37]. This is the principle according to which souls should be won for Himself and for His kingdom.

Nevertheless, His conduct toward the scribes and Pharisees must seem astonishing to us. From the outset He preached the law sharply to them. He relentlessly condemned their piety and warned against them as blind leaders of the blind [Matt. 15:14]. And to His disciples He frankly declared, “To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to others in parables, so that (*ἵνα*) they do not perceive, although they already see it, and do not understand, although they already hear it” (Luke 8:10). And why should they not know the mystery of the kingdom of God? “The heart of this people is hardened” (Matt. 13:15; cf. John 12:39-41). Israel is hardened and lives under the judgment of

hardening. After the nation has hardened itself, God has now given it over into His judgment, blinded its eyes, hardened its heart, so that it cannot believe (John 12:39-40). If this is true of Israel in general, it is particularly true of the scribes and Pharisees according to the principle, “To whom much has been given, from him much is sought” [Luke 12:48]. It is also true according to the experienced fact that daily association with God’s Word without repentance unfailingly works the greatest degree of hardening and provokes the judgment of God.

However, we dare not conclude from this that Christ has not desired the salvation of the scribes and Pharisees and has passed them over with His grace. He does not desire that anyone be lost. He earnestly, sincerely desires that the godless should turn from his evil way [*Wesen*] and live. We know how Jesus has wooed the souls of many Pharisees. One thinks of Nicodemus (John 3), Simon the Pharisee (Luke 6), the rich young Bible scholar of whom Mark reports: ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἐμβλέψας αὐτῷ ἠγάπησεν αὐτὸν (Mark 10:21).<sup>3</sup> And how many times Jesus wanted to speak amiably with other scribes before His words became so sharp, so hard, so bitter, so relentless, as in the later period and especially at the end of His prophetic activity.

John 5 might serve as a basis for this supposition. After the Passover feast already mentioned, occurring in the first year of His public appearance, Jesus returns to Jerusalem a second time. He heals a sick man at the Pool of Bethesda. Because He does this on a Sabbath day, the Jews take Him to task. Now a lengthy conversation occurs, and although the Pharisees are already full of rancor and are determined to put an end to Him, He speaks quietly to them, impartially, convincingly, without sharpness or bitterness. He does indeed preach law to them, but also winsome gospel. Among other things He says, “Whoever hears My voice and believes Him who sent Me has everlasting life and does not come into the judgment, but has passed from death to life” (v. 24). He even witnesses to them that He seeks their salvation when He says, “I say such a thing to you so that you might be saved” (ὅτι ἵνα ὑμεῖς σωθῆτε, v. 34) and complains, “And you do not want to come to Me, so that you might have life” (v. 40). No, nothing was lacking on His part. He strove also for the souls of the scribes and Pharisees, and not only according to outward appearance. They belonged to the children of Jerusalem too, of whom He said, “How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings” [Matt. 23:37]. At the end of His teaching activity the hot tears, wrung from Him by the unspeakable woes on those He had vainly taken great pains to rescue, were meant for them as well.

It is not our purpose here to bring this into accord with the fact that Israel lay under the judgment of hardening. We cannot search out the unsearchable ways of God, nor can we make His incomprehensible judgments comprehensible. If we wish to know why the scribes and Pharisees were not saved, we must cling to the words of Christ: “You were not willing” [Matt. 23:37]. The teachers and officials of the Jewish church were the most prominent and the worst of the unwilling in Israel, that is, of those who had refused to consider that which served for their peace.<sup>4</sup> Scarcely had Jesus begun His teaching activity among them, then already they had firmly established that they did not want to hear Him, and if they could not stop His mouth in any other way, then He would have to die.

Why did they not wish to listen to Him? Because His preaching stood in contrast to all their views of and hopes for the kingdom of God. They expected an earthly; and He proclaimed a spiritual kingdom. They expected that the Messiah would remove the hated yoke of the Romans from their necks and give them back their political freedom; and He said to them, “Even if the Romans did not rule over you, you would still be slaves. Whoever sins is a slave of sin. If the Son makes you free, then you are free indeed” (John 8:34,36). They claimed a right of citizenship in Messiah’s kingdom by reason of their physical descent from Abraham; and He said to them, “You must be born anew, or else you will not see the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). They observed all the precepts of the elders as scrupulously as possible and deemed this to be their glory; but He said, “You serve Me in vain, because you teach such



doctrines which are nothing but commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9). Ceremonial consecrations, washings, purifications, Sabbath celebrations, and food and drink were of more value to them than love and mercy. He healed on the Sabbath, He permitted His disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath without rebuke in order to quiet their hunger, and He ate with unwashed hands. They expected a kingdom in which they would be showered with earthly goods, worldly honor, and temporal happiness and would rule the world with the Lord’s Anointed. And He who claimed to be the Messiah required His followers to suffer with Him and said, “Whoever wishes to follow after Me, let him take up his cross and follow Me,” and “The Son of Man has no place to lay His head” [Matt. 16:24; 8:20].

He startled them from their sweetest dreams, destroyed their fondest hopes, and humbled them as no one had ever done before. Therefore He is so utterly odious to them that they could not speak a friendly word to Him. However, did not the people share their hopes and dreams and yet held to the Prophet from Nazareth? Certainly, but they also finally rejected Him, after they recognized the nature of the kingdom that He preached. That the scribes and Pharisees were done with Him more quickly and hated Him more fiercely than all others was tied to their vocation. They were the most respected people in the church, for they had studied theology and they knew the Law. They considered themselves highly exalted over the people, of whom they spoke with disdain and said, “The people, who do not know the Law, are cursed” (John 7:49). Because of their position in the church they expected special honor in the Messiah’s kingdom. And this pretender to Messiah’s throne said to them, “Prostitutes and adulterers will enter the kingdom of heaven ahead of you” [Matt. 21:31]. This was outrageous and shocking; such presumption had never been shown to them by anyone before; it could only be paid for by blood.

Now if what this Man taught was true, then not only had they been in error their entire lives, but they had also led others astray. If this Man was not a false prophet and a deceiver of the people, then they were. The work of their entire lives would thus have been in vain, and they would be the greatest of all sinners. And one more thing to consider. If anyone has occupied himself with the Law, with Scripture for ten, twenty, fifty or more years and after that is still pleased with his own righteousness, with purifications of dishes and cups, and still sees the door to the kingdom of heaven in the physical descent from Abraham, and on the basis of his own excellence he still thinks that he is able to lay claim to a place of honor in it—then he has often deadened his conscience, resisted the Spirit of God, and willfully shut his eyes against the truth, and the daily association with God’s Word has only made him more hardened. From the witness of a long line of theologians, we can see how hard it is to come out from such error of mind and heart if one has already imbibed it with his mother’s milk.

So it happened that the scribes and Pharisees revealed themselves in their interaction with the Son of Man to be more hardened and more hostile than all others. So it happened that His powerful preaching, which profoundly effected others, bounced off their hearts as off armor of brass and merely produced a greater obduracy in them. How incalculable was the result! The scribes and Pharisees not only ran blindly into certain destruction themselves, but along with them they also drew the people, whose salvation they were called to seek. They sped up the bursting in of God’s judgment and the execution of the curse, which the people invited upon themselves at their own instigation by shouting out on that ominous day before Pilate: “His blood be on us and on our children” [Matt. 27:25].

Who could escape the tragedy of this portion of the history of the kingdom of God! God promised the lost world a Savior; Israel was the bearer of that promise; from it the Promised One according to the flesh should come. From century to century it waited expectantly for the Blessed One, and when He appeared at last, it rejected Him. And those whose only task was to actively preserve the promises of Him among the people, to place His image before the eyes of one generation after the other, to remind them constantly of His coming, and to prepare for Him a ready people—they pursued Him with fierce hatred and incited the people to cry out for His blood before a pagan governor! This is the saddest episode in the history of mankind since Adam’s fall.

## Lessons of warning for leaders of the church today

What was written beforehand, however, was written for our learning [Rom. 15:4]. A similar task has been assigned to us, as was first assigned to the teachers of the Jewish church. We are called to actively preserve the remembrance of the Son of Man in His congregation and to prepare it for its future day in heaven [*den Tag seiner Zukunft*]. The church has the promise that He will return in glory, but He delays long. How easily His image can now fade in the hearts of many. How easily it can be given distorted features. In this case God would call us to account, those whom He has established in His congregation as guardians and caretakers of His congregation.

In the Jewish church, which failed to appreciate the Messiah and rejected Him, the teachers and leaders were not only complicit in this deterioration; they were the ones who bore the most guilt. But is this the general rule? This much is certain: no church has ever yet decayed unless their teachers, preachers, and professors as a whole have also decayed with it. Yes, only too often that which played out in the Jewish church in the days of the Son of Man has repeated itself in the times since. The *decay has primarily come down from the shepherds upon the sheep*.<sup>5</sup>

Paul saw in advance that it would be this way. Therefore when he took leave of the Ephesian elders in Miletus, he raised his voice in warning and said, "I know that after my departure grievous wolves will come among you, who will not spare the flock. Also from among you men will arise, who will speak distorted doctrine and will draw many disciples to them" (Acts 20:28-30). Luther rightly made the bishops and parish priests answerable for the decay in the church in which he had been raised. In the age of orthodoxy it was the theologians who frequently turned the struggle for truth, necessary and justified in itself, into an unspiritual strife between schools and factions, just as the Pharisees were zealous over forms and surrendered the content. Who was responsible for the rationalism which laid waste the church life of Germany for many decades? Primarily the rationalistic theologians. The congregations and individual Christians had in many cases long resisted the rationalistic leaven. Why is God's church in Germany today again as a "hut in a garden of cucumbers" [Isa. 1:8]? It is because the leaders, the professors of theology who have fallen away from Scripture, have trained up a generation of pastors who, not believing the Bible themselves, have brought unbelief into the congregations. And the sectarian churches of our country, most of which still left the authority of Scripture untouched four or five decades ago, would not stand in so sad a condition today if their preachers had not emptied their congregations of Christ [*entchristlicht*] and were not constantly striving to rob them of what remains of God's truth and to place them completely upon the unstable ground of reason. These are the same ones who, for the most part, have secularized the house of God and have spoiled for God's people any appetite for serious things.

We let these examples serve as a warning. The danger is not minimal that the church will go astray through our fault. The danger is not minimal that we will not only bring a quick condemnation upon ourselves, but will also drag thousands of souls, whom God has committed to us, into ruin with us.

We also are even inclined to *construct unspiritual images of the kingdom of God and to yield to carnal hopes*. That the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit [Rom. 14:17], that it does not come with outward observation [Luke 17:20], that it does not manifest itself in external organizations and forms, is not ruled through a hierarchical officialdom with lesser and greater authorities, but is rather a kingdom of the heart in which Jesus rules as the one and only Master through His gospel and works and creates all good, that it is a kingdom of the cross, whose

citizens must suffer shame, dishonor, and persecution with their King—this is hard for us to accept also. We too would gladly like to see our church stand out in the world as great, distinguished, esteemed, and influential. It vexes us when anyone speaks disparagingly of it, chides it for being an un-American church, and chides us Lutherans for being narrow-minded, bigoted, foolish, and says of us that we are stuck 300 years behind the times. It goes against our grain when anyone looks down at us and says, “Those Missourians, those Wisconsinites, those people in the Synodical Conference, who are they? It seems to me that I’ve heard of them somewhere.”

We would also gladly like to be of some value to the world and gain its recognition. Consequently, we stand in danger of shifting the goal, and instead of bringing a bride to Christ who is without spot, blemish, and wrinkle, standing holy and blameless before Him in love [Eph. 5:27], we gather up for Him a great crowd that means something before the world, a church which is popular and plays a role in public life. If that has become our goal, then we easily fall into a corrupted attitude toward Jesus. We then no longer direct our attention primarily to proclaiming His Word simply and purely and undiminished.

Instead, we would place much importance on it being done prudently, cautiously, without offense to feelings—as many would say, in an “evangelical manner.” We then would still preach law—of course! But we would snap off its sharp barbs. We would indeed preach that all men are sinners, that even among God’s saints there is no one without fault. But we would say it in such a way that it affords an excuse to the sinners to whom we are preaching, and they would comfort themselves in thinking: “You are indeed a sinner, that is true, but others are also. Everyone is. That is now part and parcel of the human condition.” Then we are no longer preaching the law till it hurts,<sup>6</sup> and we no longer trouble ourselves to bring the hearer to a consciousness that in God’s sight there is no good thing in him, that sin has poisoned his entire nature and his being, that he is a slave to sin and is sold under sin [Rom. 7:14] and therefore is a child of wrath [Eph. 2:3] and of death, and that it is terrible to fall into the hands of the living God [Heb. 10:31]. We then would still preach gospel, but we’d know how to skillfully avoid the offense of the cross of Christ [Gal. 5:11]. We would still preach that there is salvation in Jesus, but we’d no longer stress that salvation is given in no one else and also that no other name is given to mankind whereby we should be saved [Acts 4:12]. We then would also still preach sanctification and censure the sins going full swing in the world, but we would do it in such a way that we offend no one and refrain from insulting the world within and outside the church, and indeed refrain from upsetting the respected and influential and alienating them from our church, without whom it cannot become large and gain an honored position.

Similarly, we also stand in danger of *priding ourselves in our lineage*. As the Jews were proud of their physical descent from the great patriarch, with whom God had spoken face to face and had made an everlasting covenant, and were proud of their position among the nations of the earth as the chosen people of God, with whom the God of heaven and earth had revealed Himself and who therefore knew the true religion, while all other people groped in darkness and bowed their knees before dumb idols—so in like manner a fleshly pride easily stirs in us over our church origins and our spiritual kinship with the man through whom God again bestowed to the church His pure gospel in these last days of the world and granted great salvation to the world. We are happy to call ourselves the orthodox church, the true visible church on earth. We gladly point to the fact that we have the pure doctrine in the midst of a Christendom deeply sunk into error, having indeed already lost in part the fundamental truths of Christianity. We are what we are through God’s grace; this indeed we add. As long as this confession comes from our heart, then our boast is proper. But how easily it becomes a mere pious phrase, with which self-conceit adorns itself. If it should ever slip in among us, however, that the grace we have received more than others does not more deeply humble and shame us, if ever we remember no longer that God has blessed us above others because He, as is His manner, wanted to make known the richness

of His mercy to those most unworthy and show all sinners what grace is for their comfort, then we would already have set foot on the path of the scribes and Pharisees, a path which ends in red-hot hatred toward Jesus and leads unfailingly to the despising of His gospel.

Finally, the danger arises from our calling that we take a false position over against Jesus and His kingdom. We are theologians; we have studied theology; we know the doctrine of our church and how it is presented by the old dogmatists. This is to our advantage, but only if we have first learned to test the teachings of the fathers from Scripture and have accepted them only because they have come through this testing as pure gold. But if we have not learned from our theological studies that Scripture is the only fountain of Israel from which we must dip, if we do not permit Scripture to explain itself, but understand it in the light of the exposition of the fathers, if we read it through any sort of human glasses, however carefully they may be polished, then we stand in the selfsame danger to which the Jewish scribes succumbed and to which Luther pointed again and again with such great earnestness. It is the danger that we allow Scripture to be obscured by its expositors, that we cut off all opportunity for it to speak directly to us instead of through translators, and we finally come to the point that we believe men instead of Scripture.

Our calling necessarily means also that we deal often with God's Word. This is an enviable advantage which we have above many others. But there is a danger that what we do because of our calling is, after a while, *done only in a professional way*, that we read the Bible as anyone might read a secular book for improvement of his professional knowledge, that we study theology as someone might study a secular professional topic, that the public *proclamation of the Word and the preparation for that becomes more and more routine*. Routine stultifies. Whatever one does in a routine manner he does more or less mechanically over the course of time. The inner man as a whole no longer participates in it, but almost entirely the mind only. The heart no longer functions in the process. The understanding has gathered a reserve of theological knowledge, which is sufficient for the performance of the office. Even the forms in which it is presented to the congregation lie complete in the storeroom of the memory and do not need first to be forged each time in the fire of the inner life. And then, when the calling makes unceasing demands upon someone, when he needs to lurch from one official duty to another, then he lives off his savings. Then he constantly goes back into the old paths and forms, which no longer arouse feeling but leave the heart cold, and finally nothing remains of the inner possession except the outward forms, just as it was with the scribes.

These forms cannot keep the church on the proper track. A pastor who no longer at all or only feebly participates with his heart in the work of his calling might still retain the form of pure doctrine and deliver from the pulpit the Scriptural doctrine in dogmatically correct form. But as soon as he leaves it, he will overturn what he has taught. As a teacher in the church one can outwardly hold firm to the pure teaching and still help to mislead the church into serious error or allow it to be led astray. And if it ever comes to this that only the forms of Christianity or of Lutheranism remain, then one places uncommonly great weight upon these as the only remnants left from an earlier richness. Then they become the main things, the entire thing, as they did with the scribes. And then if anyone comes wanting to breathe new life into the dying church (the very same life which once clung to the now empty forms, but which under his leadership now moves within new forms), they refuse him and persecute him as an errorist and misleader. Then if Jesus through His witnesses lets it be said to such teachers of our hardened church that their formalities are worthless, that they must be born again, then their pride rebels against such preaching of repentance. They are outraged that one would dare to preach repentance to them, the leaders and teachers of the church. They take shelter behind their call and office, appeal to their agreement with the fathers, and in this way delay the coming of Christ's kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

We dare not shut our eyes to this danger, the danger of externalizing the preaching office and

Lutheranism in general, least of all in our times. To cite only one reason, our pastoral profession is strongly enticed—by external conditions in many cases—into being a routine performance of our office. Unusual demands are placed upon it. In part the changeover of language brings this with it, for it nearly doubles the pastoral workload in many of our congregations. In part it comes from the fact that not a few of our pastors today are involved in outside work [*Allotria trieben*], sometimes at the wishes of the congregation, sometimes contrary to it, and they waste a great portion of their time with things which lie outside the scope of their call. This busyness with many things—rushing about, running and chasing from one thing to another—scarcely permits many to take stock of themselves. There remains little time to go deeply into portions of Scripture, to commune with oneself in quietness, to grapple inwardly with the questions concerning the kingdom of God, which are constantly resurfacing, and to become clear in one's own mind what is salutary for the church in our time. As long as one still lives off the supplies gathered in better days, things still keep going along, but one cannot live off of these forever. If no time of gathering follows, then with many it quickly comes to this: a merely businesslike performance of their office; and complete superficiality is only a matter of time.

### **Lessons of remedy and comfort for leaders of the church today**

In the statements just made we have not spoken of conditions existing in our church, but of dangers which threaten it. Far be it from us to place the Lutheran church of our day on the same level as the hardened Jewish church at the time of Christ's walk on earth, or to compare our teaching profession with that of the scribes and Pharisees, something which lay under the judgment of hardening. Although we are no longer a church in its youthful vigor, we are also not yet a dying one. God gives us so many comforting evidences to the contrary. But if anyone denies the existence of the dangers I have named and considers it unthinkable that we would ever succumb to them, he has already set one foot on the path of the scribes and Pharisees. Whoever lets himself think that he stands may well take heed that he does not fall [1 Cor. 10:12] and that what was written beforehand was written for our learning.

It is also not the case that we must succumb to the threatening dangers. God be praised, No! The Lutheran church need not deteriorate just because the Jewish church did. From the fact that we have had the gospel for three generations, it does not follow that we must lose it in the fourth. If this is to be feared, judging by how things have usually happened, yet it is certainly not inevitable. God rules in His church and indeed over the entire world, and He rules wonderfully. One can follow His tracks; yet one can not point out in advance the path He will take. But the Scripture and the interaction of the Son of Man with the scribes and Pharisees do teach us this: God does not want our destruction. If we teachers gradually cause the church to die, Christ will not be responsible. The tears which He wept over the children of Jerusalem and even over those hardened among them guarantee this to us.

And if for no other reason He wanted our salvation and spiritual success, then already He wants it for the sake of His congregation, which is not served by spiritually dead teachers. For our own souls' sake, for which His divine blood was shed, and for His congregation's sake, which He has purchased at great cost, *He will not abandon us in these evil times or neglect us*. If for more than one reason we stand in particular danger, then His dealings with us are also certainly adapted to rouse us from the sleep of spiritual security, to bring us to an awareness of that which serves for our peace, and to strengthen, fortify, and confirm us.

No one has as much opportunity for handling God's Word and testing His power for us and for others as we [leaders] do. No one is admonished to repent so often and so forcefully. Though for many others a respectable life—a life which has remained free from serious mistakes—makes the recognition of personal sinfulness more difficult, it is simply unthinkable that a pastor should think of himself as a

living saint. There are sins there, great and heavy sins, which one cannot so easily forget and which accuse him often and intensely. These are the sins committed while performing the duties of his office. Where is there a pastor who can look back upon his ministerial life and say, "Praise God, I also am a sinner and have in other ways failed often. But in the conduct of my ministry I have nothing of which to reprove myself?" Such a one would need to have been smitten with blindness. How many mistakes we do make in assessing the souls for whom we have to bear our shepherd's duty. And in the use of law and gospel! How many sins of omission witness against us! How tepid is our love for Christ and for the brethren! How easily we become discouraged, dejected, tired of our duties, and would most gladly like to say, "Lord, send whomever You will." What pastor would dare to open his mouth against God and say, "Lord, if any one of the souls entrusted to me is lost, it is not my fault; I have neglected nothing that was proper for me to do and have done nothing which could have caused anyone offense." What pastor, concerning whose ministerial conduct all sorts of lovely things are said at his anniversary celebration, would not need to say in his heart: "Whoever gives praise for your official conduct does not know you, or else he would today praise only God's grace, which has had patience with you for so long." The sins of office [*Amtssünden*] which, judged by their consequences, are heavier than all others humbles a pastor, makes him small before God, so that he daily hungers and thirsts for righteousness, stills his hunger and thirst in the gospel, and thus does not perish, but grows and increases.

*Another means* through which God protects His servants from falling asleep is *the cross associated with the office*. If we see no fruit of our preaching for a long time, if we have much adversity, if we must suffer for the sake of our witness, if even those whom we had considered genuine children of God turn against us and we think that we stand totally alone, then Jesus often has a free access into our heart as at no other time and keeps company with us, through which we are blessed to overflowing. Then His power is made mighty in our weakness in special measure.

Also, the *blessing associated with our office* which we are *allowed to see* now and then frequently effects a revival of our spirit. We see the seed which we have sown in great weakness sprout, grow, form ears, and produce fruit overnight, without our doing and often under the most unfavorable conditions. Then we are ashamed of our small faith and let the goodness of God lead us to repentance [Rom. 2:4].

To recall yet another way in which Jesus interacts with us, and by which we are preserved from death and assisted in spiritual growth, we should lastly point out *brotherly fellowship* [*Verkehr*], as we experience it particularly in our conferences. This word applies to each one who takes part in them: "Be watchful and strengthen that which is about to die" [Rev. 3:2]. But no one should do this with the attitude that he alone still has a fullness of sound, strong life in him and that the others all lie in their final throes. No, the new life does not pulsate in anyone so strongly that it cannot stand strengthening by others. But whoever can strengthen should help strengthen. That is why we gather together in our conferences. For this reason we occupy ourselves with God's Word, which is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness [2 Tim. 3:16]. This word does not return again empty [Isa. 55:11]. To which brother has it never pierced the soul like a fiery arrow! Who has never returned from a conference strengthened in the inner man, with deepened knowledge, with firmer trust, with a rekindled joy of faith?

This is how the Son of Man associates with those whom He has commissioned to preach His salvation to a lost world and to prepare His congregation for His final coming. He Himself is the One who takes care of their souls, awakens in them a hunger and thirst for righteousness, satisfies that hunger, strengthens their faith, makes them skillful for all good works, wakes them up when they are about to fall asleep in this midnight hour and sink back into the sleep of spiritual death, so that the new life in them does not go out, despite all weakness. And in this sense He also confirms to them the word of the apostle: "As one dying, and behold, we live" [2 Cor. 6:9]. If we permit the Son of Man to associate

with us in this way, we will be of benefit to His church always and remain guarded from the fate of the scribes and Pharisees.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Endnotes, headings, other conventions of formatting, and anything contained in brackets have been included by the translator or the editor. Unless noted otherwise, Scripture quotations are a translation of Henkel's German quotations.

<sup>2</sup> These words are highlighted in boldface in the original article. The reader may regard them as a subtitle defining the article's content.

<sup>3</sup> Continuing what was done in previous articles, here and elsewhere is retained the author's inclusion of the Greek text, which in this place renders: "Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (NKJ).

<sup>4</sup> This wording (*ihrem Frieden*) seems reminiscent of Jesus' words in Luke 19:42: "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

<sup>5</sup> From this point on in the article, the formatting of words in boldface or italics has been added by the editor to highlight the various issues raised by the author.

<sup>6</sup> This is the second occurrence within the article of the author phrasing something in English. On page 179 "till it hurts" are the exact words used, written in English perhaps to make the phrase stand out or to echo its usage at the time.

<sup>7</sup> The German here is *halten so das Kommen des Reiches Christi auf*. Presumably, the "coming of Christ's kingdom" refers to His spiritual coming into the hearts of people. In regard to this paragraph as a whole, one wonders if Henkel's comments had some anecdotal basis connected to church developments that he observed taking place in his own lifetime and in the record of church history.

## **The Proper Use of the Gospel Among Us**

Michael J. Roehl

Editor's Note: Originally presented as a regional conference essay and recommended by that conference for inclusion in the *Journal*, this article is here offered with revisions made by the writer and the editor. It presents the writer's concerns about our approach in presenting the gospel as it pertains to Christian sanctification and is to be regarded as a study essay, not a confessional position of the CLC. It is the writer's and editor's hope that it will stimulate further study and discussion at future pastoral study clubs and conferences within our fellowship.

### **Introduction**

The questions at issue here should in no way be regarded as academic, that is, lacking any real substantive or practical meaning or application for Christians in the real world. Correctly answering these questions will affect how Christians present the gospel and for what purpose. Nothing could be more important. Such questions should, in fact, represent a vital concern for both pastor and layman

alike, since they involve the very core of our Christian faith: the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and how it is to be proclaimed. The two questions at issue here are these:

1) *What is the actual source or origin of good works in the Christian?*

2) *Does Scripture use the gospel to motivate good works by creating and then appealing to a sense of indebtedness in the Christian?*

The two questions are related, since a Scriptural answer to the first will give clarity and direction to the second.

### ***1. What is the actual source or origin of good works in the Christian?***

The short answer to the first question is that the basic source or origin of all that is good is God. Therefore also the original impulse for every good work done by the Christian comes from the Holy Spirit. ***“Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God”*** (2 Cor. 3:5).<sup>1</sup> Within the Christian the new man, created in the perfect image of his God, longs always and only to walk in loving obedience to that one true God. The confusion here begins to demonstrate itself when the question is asked a bit differently: Why does the Christian do the good that he does?

That there is confusion on this point is evidenced by statements like these: “I do good works because I am thankful”; “The source of all good works is the thankful Christian heart.” We can be a bit surprised and confused to hear such statements criticized, in part because we have long heard and used similar expressions in conservative circles. Yet while we can certainly assume that such statements represent imprecise language rather than doctrinal aberration, clarity here is essential, especially as it relates to the second question posed above. It should also be noted that expressions like *“motivated by the gospel,”* commonly used by our forefathers and by us, were employed as a reaction to (and in opposition to) statements such as “motivated by the law” or any such notion. In that sense these can be understood rightly and should in no way be condemned. Nevertheless, since the Word of God is very precise in this regard, Christians should strive to imitate the clarity and precision of Holy Writ also in this critical area.

In his Letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul describes the battle that rages in every Christian heart: ***“For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do”*** (Rom. 7:15). Paul is clearly speaking from the perspective of the new man, since it is the new man alone that desires what is good and pleasing to God and hates what is evil. Every Christian recognizes the struggle described here by Paul, namely, that the Old Adam and new man continually battle for control of what the Christian says and does. Other passages define this battle for the Christian as putting off the old and putting on the new. ***“Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness”*** (Eph. 4:22-24). Likewise, in Colossians 3:9-10 Paul says, ***“Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.”***

Specific and uniform language is used in both of these passages. In making reference to the new man, both verses use a form of ἐνδύω, which is routinely translated as *put on*.<sup>2</sup> It is important here to note that the Bible never explicitly speaks of “building up” or “strengthening” the new man.<sup>3</sup> This would indeed be a strange concept, given the Biblical description of the new man as ***“created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”*** It would be strange to think of something that God Himself



calls righteous, holy, and created in His own image as something which needs strengthening, educating, or building up. The new man in the Christian parallels Adam's perfect nature prior to the fall into sin, which until that fall certainly lacked nothing.

The Bible does speak of strengthening, edifying, and building up the person, but only in connection with Christians insofar as they are both old and new man. We recognize, for example, that the law of God, according to its so-called third use, has a didactic or teaching function. Yet we also note that this didactic function applies neither to the old Adam, which can be taught no good thing, nor to the new man, which is complete and holy, having been created in God's image. It applies to the Christian as a whole, in that he is both old and new man.

We begin to see where the two questions at issue here begin to converge and overlap. Since the basis or source of all good works is the Holy Spirit working through the new man, and since the new man can only be "put on" rather than strengthened or educated, this in turn speaks directly to the question of whether or not the gospel should be used to induce or motivate good works by creating a sense of indebtedness in the Christian.

Before we turn to that question, however, we would do well to address in greater detail the use of expressions such as "The Christian does good works because he is thankful." While it is certainly accurate to say that the Christian is filled with thanksgiving when he does good works, to say that the Christian is doing good works *because* he is thankful is inaccurate and a bit misleading. Yes, the Christian is thankful, and that thankfulness always seeks an outlet. But human gratitude itself is a fruit of faith and therefore cannot be the ultimate source of other good works in our lives. Nor is a thankful heart the basic motor that drives the doing of true good works. The potential confusion here is that every Christian recognizes his own personal indebtedness, as well as his own personal desire to thank his God for the gift of eternal life. Nevertheless, all good works—including Christian thankfulness—must be traced to the new man, through which the Holy Spirit works.

It is difficult to find exact analogies in our everyday lives, but consider the workings of a light bulb as a means of comparison. Those who don't know what is inside the frosted glass might well believe that the glass itself produces (is the source of) the light emitted by the light bulb. Yet the light obviously does not originate from the glass; it passes through the glass. The source is the bulb's filament. Without electricity passing through this filament, there is no light. When you apply this picture to the Christian, the electricity corresponds to the Holy Spirit, the filament to the new man, and the frosted glass represents our feelings of gratitude and thanksgiving. All of our good works find their origin in the new man, but since they are all "filtered" through the gratitude that we all feel, the ultimate source or origin is often not properly recognized. Our sense of gratitude is, in and of itself, a product of the new man, in which the Holy Spirit works.

Jesus' picture of Himself as the Vine and the individual Christians as the attached branches is even more telling. It would be rather silly to say that branches produce fruits (good works) because they are thankful to the Vine. Branches produce fruit always and only because they are grafted into the Vine. Such is their natural and proper function. Sever that relationship, and no amount of thankfulness could ever produce a single fruit. In fact, thankfulness itself could not even exist. With this metaphor Jesus therefore taught us that the all-important factor or ingredient here is our relationship to Him through faith. The key is not our own personal feelings of gratitude (which will, of course, be present), but the Holy Spirit working through the new man in us.

So then, are Christians thankful? Of course. Do Christians do good works with thankful hearts? Absolutely. Do Christians walk according to God's commands with a spirit of thanksgiving rather than a spirit of bondage or compulsion? Clearly. But is the ultimate source of any good work my own

feeling of thankfulness? Clearly not. The ultimate source is God Himself, who lives and works through the new man, which always and only longs to follow God's will. That new man needs no prompting or coercion to do so.

This brings us to our second question, which concerns the use of the gospel as a motivating force for good works:

## ***2. Does Scripture use the gospel to motivate good works by creating and then appealing to a sense of indebtedness in the Christian?***

This question seeks to answer whether we Christians do what we do simply because we are Christians (because that is what Christians do when directed by the new man), or if good works need to be identified, prompted, and encouraged based upon the Christian's subjective feelings of thankfulness or indebtedness for what Jesus has done for him. According to the first position good works need only be identified to the Christian, who then, having put on the new man, can be expected to operate willingly and productively in accord with such information. According to the second position, however, good works are in effect manipulated by the gospel. That is, the Christian is made to believe that he has some spiritual debt or obligation toward his God, which debt in turn serves as the impetus and motivation for him to carry out good works. The difference here will primarily come to light in connection with our preaching and exhortation, but it also has wider and deeper application for all Christians.

A practical example may help to identify the difference in the two approaches and thus specify the problem we seek to avert. Picture two very different scenarios which may occur in a family household. In the first a mother calls her child to her side and, filled with love, begins to pour out her unconditional love on the child through her words and her embrace. She does this gratuitously and unconditionally, because that is what fills her heart. She in no way expresses her love in the hope of getting something in return from her child. Her love comes forth sincerely as an expression of her feelings. In response the child is filled with love and thanksgiving and may well desire to show his appreciation to his mother, but that is not why she did what she did. This is the first scenario, and it represents God's declaration of love toward mankind in the gospel. The second scenario is the manipulative mother who, far from seeking to express her unconditional love for her child, seeks to manipulate that child with sentiments like this: "After all that I've done for you, would it be too much to have you help around the house a little more, and maybe remember my birthday when it comes around?" This represents a potential misuse of the gospel, which is what we seek to avert, for it would effectively turn gospel into law and direct our focus away from Christ and toward our own works. It is inconceivable to imagine that God in His Word ever operates in this way, and a careful study of the Scriptures bears out that He (and it) does not.

When searching the Bible for answers to our second question, we acknowledge a critical reality in how we must proceed. As we struggle to be guided always and only by the Word of God, we find at least four distinct means by which the Bible guides God's children. The first is when God in His Word expressly and specifically forbids a certain thought or action as sinful. In this regard we have no doubt that murder is wrong, for God prohibits it so directly and without equivocation.

The second means by which God directs us in His Word is the positive converse to the first means; it is the express and specific command or exhortation to do something, as when we are told that "***supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men***" (1 Tim. 2:1). We have no question that such things are to be done by Christians in obedience to God's will.

These are the two most easily discerned and straightforward means by which God directs human beings. In such cases we are left with few, if any, questions and virtually no room for prevarication or indecision. There are, however, two other methods by which the Scriptures teach us: *inference* (or

*logical progression*) and *example*. *Inference* occurs when the Bible clearly condemns or promotes something, but not in so many words. For instance, in connection with the truth expressed in Romans 1:26, “**For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature,**” we understand that this is obviously a clear condemnation of lesbianism, even though we find no express prohibition “You shall not practice lesbianism.” When God teaches us in this way, it can at times be somewhat harder to ascertain His holy will, but His intentions are usually quite clear.

The fourth teaching method in the Bible is *example*, which can be the most difficult to fully comprehend and apply. To our knowledge Jesus never commanded us to conclude our prayers with “Not my will, but Yours be done,” but He certainly taught us to do so by His own example in the garden of Gethsemane. The Bible does not command pastors to begin their sermons with greetings such as, “**Grace and peace be multiplied to you . . .**” (etc.), but the apostles certainly left us with a worthy example from their Epistles. **1 Corinthians 10:11** also validates the legitimacy of the *example* teaching method when it says, “**Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**”

The point to remember here is that when it comes to answering whether or not we are to elicit good works by creating a sense of indebtedness, we must satisfy ourselves with *Biblical examples only*, since the Bible does not provide a specific command or prohibition.<sup>4</sup>

While the two questions stated previously may be new to many of our readers, what is at stake here cannot be overestimated. Since it is essential that passages not be omitted from consideration when handling something as precious as the gospel of our salvation, it was for this writer necessary to go through the New Testament in its entirety, seeking guidance on this issue only. The following is a summary of the results of that search: a consideration of what Jesus said in the Gospels and what the apostles wrote in the Epistles. We consider the pertinent passages in light of the second question asked above:

#### **Did Jesus use the gospel to motivate good works by creating and then appealing to a sense of indebtedness in the Christian?**

First of all, I was unable to find an example of any kind where Jesus used the gospel to elicit or impel good works. Nor could I find any passage where Jesus appealed to a believer’s personal debt of thanksgiving as the basis for his good works or to motivate such works. Such exhortations would presumably have taken the form of “Now if you are truly thankful for what I have done for you, you will . . . ,” or “Out of thanksgiving for the great things that I have done for you, I want you to. . . .” Jesus never spoke that way. In fact, it is contrary to the very nature of the gospel to think in terms of a debt that a person must endeavor to repay. Our sin-debt has been completely erased by the life and death of Jesus Christ. When the Christian is brought to faith in that good news and by that good news, his new man willingly and eagerly runs the way of God’s commands.<sup>5</sup> Any notion of repaying a debt or obligation with our good works—even a “debt of love”—is foreign to the gospel of Christ.

Not surprisingly, what we find in our study of the words of Jesus are simple statements of what He has done for us (or was about to do for us), at times followed by an exhortation to think and walk in harmony with our Christian calling. The child of God will, of course, be thankful, but that thankfulness is never held forth by Christ as the motivation for obedience.

Those who truly understand the gospel should not be surprised to find that Jesus spoke always and only as He did. The gospel is the power of God that brings the new man to life in the human being. Since on this earth the new man must always “share a body” with the old Adam, the Christian is in constant need of instruction and encouragement, so that he can walk according to the desires of the new man rather

than the old. The point here is that while the understanding and will of the Christian may be weak, the new man in him (as we have asserted above) is perfect and holy at all times. The new man does not need to be encouraged to love God and walk in harmony with God's will. That is continually the perfect will of the new man from the moment of his creation, for that new man is created in the very image of God, as we hear in the statement "***that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness***" (Eph. 4:24).

The goal, then, is to "***put on***" the new man with the gospel, for from the new man good works flow as naturally and spontaneously as water from an artesian well. It is, in fact, rather pointless to try to promote good works in the Christian in any way other than by having him put on the new man. No other part or element of the human being could ever produce a truly good work, for no part of the sinful flesh would *even desire* to please God. Any attempt to appeal to or to motivate a human being by using a sense of debt, or by pointing out to him an obligation of thanksgiving that he ought to act upon, appeals only to something other than the new man, for the new man needs no such coercion, manipulation, or management. To be sure, the Christian as a whole needs encouragement and guidance to carry out his Christian walk. But addressing this reality is much different than using the gospel to create a sense of indebtedness in the Christian.

At times Jesus did hold forth His own actions as an example for His people to follow, but He established His own conduct as a pattern, never as something intended to create an obligation which we must somehow fulfill with our good works. The Savior's words in **John 13:14-15 come to mind**: "***If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.***" Note that Jesus did not say, "Out of thanksgiving or gratitude for what I have just done, you ought to do the same." He rather gave indication that the kind of humble service He had just demonstrated should be copied by His followers. This, again, serves to instruct the Christian; it offers a deeper understanding of the will of God. But the impetus to obey that will can come only and always from the new man within us, which is the perfect creation of the Holy Spirit. All credit, glory, and honor must belong to our God, who alone "***works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure***" (Phil. 2:13).

Another statement of Jesus should be addressed which, at first, may appear to confuse the issue. In **John 14:28** He says, "***You have heard Me say to you, 'I am going away and coming back to you.' If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, 'I am going to the Father,' for My Father is greater than I.***" At first glance it would appear that Jesus was saying, in effect, "If you want to prove that you love me, you will rejoice that I am going to the Father." Jesus here said nothing of the kind. He was in no way trying to prompt a good work from the disciples by eliciting a feeling of thanksgiving or indebtedness in them with His "*If you loved Me*" statement. He was simply using a conditional sentence to prove a point. The construction in the Greek is a second class conditional sentence (determined as unfulfilled), which means that in the condition (the protasis "*if you loved Me*") Jesus was assuming, for the sake of argument, that the disciples *did not* love Him as they should have. He assumed this because the disciples failed the second part, the apodosis or conclusion ("*you would rejoice because I said . . .*").<sup>6</sup> Jesus was not drawing out some feeling of indebtedness on the part of the disciples, so that they would bring forth the fruits of faith. He was commenting negatively on the quality of their love for Him. Their lack of joy at the news of His imminent return to the Father was evidence that their love for Him was faulty at best.

If Jesus did not teach us (through example, inference, or command) to use the gospel to create a sense of indebtedness which would then produce good works in the Christian, what about the inspired writers of the New Testament? Since "***All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,***" we know that one Bible passage establishes a principle of truth for the child of God. And so we ask:

## **Did the apostles use the gospel to motivate good works by creating and then appealing to a sense of indebtedness in the Christian?**

Of the dozens of New Testament passages that contribute to an understanding of this issue, none could be found that use the gospel as a tool to manipulate or leverage good works, but always and only to create and sustain saving faith. In fact, it is striking how Paul has a consistent pattern in his Epistles that in no way attempts to establish personal thanksgiving as the motivation for good works or as the means to elicit good works.

The regular pattern we find in Paul's letters is that he first gives thanks to God for the faith of those who originally received his letter.<sup>7</sup> He next establishes for his readers (or reminds them) exactly what Christ has done for them. This is pure gospel, and we hold passages like the following to be among the most precious in all of Scripture.

**Romans 3:21-24** *But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

**Romans 5:8** *God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

**Romans 5:18-19** *Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.*

**Ephesians 2:8-9** *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

These truths are always presented by Paul gratuitously, that is, in the sense that they are neither earned nor do they require a subsequent payment. This is true to the nature of the gospel. It is always and only a gracious statement of what God has done for man, never the other way around. The gospel never comes with a price tag or condition attached. To present it as such involves a mixing and confusion of law and gospel. Thus we would consider it incongruous to find the gospel used by a holy writer in an effort to pressure some action on the part of the Christian. It would also be strange in view of the fact that good works never need to be coerced or shamed from the new man, which is the source from which good works flow. Thus the gospel always gives, never demands. It produces spiritual life in the human being, giving birth to the new man, who lives before God in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Everything that the new man does is a good work, and he does such things willingly and without compulsion, manipulation, or any need for motivation.

After his presentation of the gospel—that which creates or “puts on” the new man in the Christian—the third part of a Pauline letter often consisted of his identification of how Christians are to act and his encouragement for them to so act in keeping with their Christian calling. This part of Scripture is commonly referred to in Lutheran theology as “evangelical admonition” or “preaching sanctification,” and it is undoubtedly the point where any confusion that exists today first found entry into the Christian thought process.

The confusion, however, is not due to the content of the Biblical texts. Rather, it seems to flow from the idea that since Paul presented the gospel and then pointed out those actions that are in harmony with our Christian calling, he thereby intended to use the gospel as a tool to draw good works from the Christian heart. In other words, this view would see the goal in Paul's epistles as the drawing out of

good works and would further assume that the apostle used the gospel as a means to achieve that goal. Because such a *modus operandi* would taint and even nullify Paul's unconditional gospel presentation, it is inconceivable that this was his true intention, and a careful evaluation of his writings should bear this out.

### **The usage of Paul in his Epistles to Christian congregations**

Consider the following passages as evidence that Paul was simply drawing a picture of what a Christian is and does.

**Colossians 3:1-3** *If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

**Colossians 3:12** *Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering.*

**Ephesians 2:10** *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*

**Ephesians 4:1** *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.*

We should note that in none of these passages is the gospel used to create a debt of love that must be repaid through good works. After proclaiming the pure, unconditional gospel to his readers, which conveyed the Spirit's power to create or renew the new man within them, Paul proceeds to point out to these Christians (and to all Christians) how to walk worthy of their noble calling—the very thing that is right and natural to the new man in every believer.

However, the perfect understanding of God's will that once filled Adam's heart has been clouded in us because of our sin. The law, according to its third use, provides the Christian with a perfect guide, something we all need because of our imperfect, sin-tainted understanding and the weakness of our flesh. Yet, note well, it is not the new man that is or can be instructed with the law, but the Christian as a whole. The new man is perfect and holy, created in the image of God, and so Paul declares, "***The law is not made for a righteous person***" (1 Tim. 1:9).<sup>8</sup> The apostle also indicates that the law does not have a saving or reforming effect on the old man, for the sinful flesh can produce nothing good or pleasing to God. "***For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells***" (Rom. 7:18).<sup>9</sup> **This third use of the law, therefore, is necessary for the Christian not according to his new man alone or his old Adam alone, but insofar as he is both. In that way all believers are unique creations with special needs, all of which our God has graciously supplied in His holy Word.**

As was the case in the earlier summation of Jesus' words, several passages here in the Pauline letters may give the reader a different impression at first glance. We therefore examine a number of these in greater detail.

**2 Corinthians 4:15** *For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.* Far from using gratitude or thankfulness as leverage, Paul here identifies thanksgiving as one of the God-pleasing fruits of faith that flows from the believing heart. If thankfulness or gratitude were actually the source or motivation for good works, this passage would have to say: ". . . that *thankfulness*, having spread through the many, may cause

thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.” This passage, rather, shows that thanksgiving itself is a *fruit* of faith (not the source or motivation for other fruits of faith) and that whenever gratitude is expressed or shown in the lives of God’s children, God Himself is glorified.

**2 Corinthians 5:14-15** *For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.* A careful study of this passage, particularly verse 15, makes it clear that Paul is not using the gospel to prompt good works. He is stating the intended result of Christ’s substitutionary death for Christians (i.e., “those who live”). The clause “*that those who live should live no longer for themselves . . .*” is introduced by ἵνα to express purpose-result (ἵνα οἱ ζῶντες μηκέτι ἑαυτοῖς ζῶσιν ἀλλὰ τῷ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἀποθανόντι καὶ ἐγερθέντι). Though many published translations render the aorist subjunctive ζῶσιν as “should live,” it seems preferable to translate as “*might live*” or “*may live*” or even “*would live.*”<sup>10</sup> We prefer to translate this way, recognizing the truth that the Christian living for Christ is more than a potentiality (or a responsibility). It’s a reality that the Lord will bring about for each believer through the victory won by His death and resurrection and through the power of the gospel.

Though translators and exegetes may grapple with whether the love that Jesus has for us (subjective genitive) *constrains* or *controls* or *compels* (συνέχει)<sup>11</sup> the believer, it doesn’t change the fact that the inspired writer is not attempting to create a debt of thanksgiving in order to prompt good works. He simply states the objective gospel truth (“*One died for all*”) and then declares the expected result: the impact of what Christ has done in our place (ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν) being carried out in our hearts and lives (“*that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for Him who died for us and rose again*”).

**Romans 12:1** *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.* The beginning and the end of this passage seem to lend credibility to opposing arguments. Paul is calling for sanctified living (“*present your bodies a living sacrifice . . .*”) based on the proper recognition of what God has done for us (“*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God . . .*”). Paul’s appeal, however, does not force obedience or motivate anyone with a sense of indebtedness. Rather, he exhorts sanctified living, the Christian’s entire devotion to God, as the essential, “*reasonable service*” of the Christian—something that need not be wrung from his spiritual nature in any way.

In this passage the conjunction οὖν has an inferential sense and is rightly translated as *therefore*. It is helpful to understand what the inferential conjunction refers back to in the context. The most common understanding is that it refers back to the entire section preceding this text, all eleven chapters of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in which he has proclaimed the unconditional gospel in such clear terms after laying out the condemning law in equally clear terms. Paul is not, on that basis, setting up thankfulness as a motivation. He is urging (Παρακαλῶ) his readers to walk in a manner befitting what they have become in Christ: people who now belong entirely to God, perfectly loved by Him, effectively claimed by Him through faith, and justified by Him through the blood of His Son.

**Ephesians 5:1-2** *Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.* Here the careful reader should note what Paul *does not say*, as well as what he *does*. He does *not* suggest that we should “walk in love out of thankfulness for the fact that Christ also has loved us. . . .”

He does not even say that we should “walk in love because Christ also has loved us. . . .” The conjunction used is not a causal ὅτι, but καθὼς, which is universally and accurately translated here in a comparative sense: “as” or “just as.” That Paul is holding up what Christ has done for us as an example to educate and encourage the Christian is clearly demonstrated in the preceding verse: “**Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.**” That approach, we should acknowledge, is far different from using the gospel as a tool to correct behavior or elicit good works.

### **The usage of other New Testament writers**

Time and space do not permit a comprehensive examination of all the passages of evangelical admonition expressed in the letters of Paul or the rest of the New Testament. No doubt, other verses not listed here would be worthy of inclusion. But it is the contention of this writer that no such passage can be rightly applied to establish the practice or even show an example of using the gospel to motivate the Christian’s obedience based on a sense of indebtedness or thankfulness. Nevertheless, a few passages from the General Epistles are offered next to show that Paul’s approach was no different than that of other inspired writers.

**Hebrews 12:1b-3** *Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.* The writer of this epistle is referring to Jesus both as a perfect example to follow and also as the assurance of final victory for the Christian in his own “race” of faith. The writer, however, does not use thanksgiving for what Jesus did as the motivation for persevering or doing the right thing. The reader is simply encouraged to remember that since Jesus suffered the hostility of sinful men, he should not think it strange or unusual when the same happens to him. The reader is also exhorted to rely on the Lord to be the “finisher” of that same faith which the Savior, the “author” of that faith, has originally given him.

**1 John 4:9-11** *In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* In this passage the Apostle John is giving a foundational reason why it is altogether right for Christians to love each other, as they also love their God. God’s love for mankind was so great that He gave His only begotten Son as the satisfactory payment for our sins. Once this gospel truth is recognized and trusted by faith, every Christian, according to the new man created or put on, loves not only His heavenly Father, but all of his brothers and sisters in Christ as well. The believer knows and accepts that he cannot do otherwise, nor does he wish to do so. To hate his fellow believer would be a denial of God’s love for him. In fact, to persist impenitently in such hatred, such lovelessness, would be a demonstration of the absence of the new man and therefore of unbelief.

The difficulty in rightly understanding this passage centers around the apostle’s use of a verb of obligation (ὀφείλομεν) and the proposed view that John is thereby seeking to create a sense of debt or obligation in the reader. First of all, we note that in the immediate and broader context John has proclaimed the same gospel, with the same power to put on the new man in his Christian readers, as



Paul and other apostles have used in their writings. Let us also recognize the concept of “reasonable service” expressed by Paul in Romans 12. John and Paul both teach the Christian to see love for his fellow believer as fitting and reasonable, as righteous and God-pleasing, as the only way to go in view of the way God loves us.

In making application of John’s exhortation to Christian love in 1 John 4, we should also note what he did not do. Though stating the believer’s obligation to love his fellow believers, John did not use the gospel proclamation of God’s love to create a thanksgiving debt and then appeal to that debt of gratitude to essentially coerce good works. John’s words cannot be pressed to say that “Out of thanksgiving for the fact that God so loved us, we ought to love our fellow Christians.” Yes, John is giving a reason for Christian love that is rooted in the gospel, but his simple statement—what the new man also sees as “reasonable service”—in no way seeks to force the desired response from the flesh or emotionally manipulate the heart with some sense of indebtedness that has to be repaid. Such compulsion is not only absent in the meaning of the apostle, but also unnecessary for the new man to respond with the love God expects.

**1 John 4:19** *We love Him because He first loved us.* Notice again the careful wording here. The passage does not attempt to manipulate love for God by creating a sense of debt over against the fact that God first loved us. The Holy Spirit simply states a fact of our Christian life: we actually love God because He first loved us. Our love for Him is an ongoing reaction to His love for us. If the Spirit’s intention was something beyond that, He would have made it clear through language like, “Since God has loved us first, we ought also to love Him back,” or “Out of gratitude for God’s initial love for us, we ought also now to love Him.”

### **Conclusion and practical application**

To this writer’s knowledge no passage can be found in the New Testament where Jesus in His ministry or any of the apostles in their inspired writings sought to establish personal thankfulness for the gospel as the motivation for good works. No passage can be found, furthermore, that has spoken in terms that we nonetheless may hear from time to time in our preaching and our discussion of spiritual matters. We ought to learn from this fact, for if the Lord and His holy inspired writers did not use the gospel in this way, neither should we.

The practical application of these matters is profound, not only for pastors, but for all Christians. It is easy for pastors, first of all, to get caught up in the problems that exist within the flocks they are called to serve and to seek to address those needs and concerns in the Sunday sermon. The error comes when pastors try to solve such problems with an *improper use of the gospel*, one that short-circuits the power of the gospel to do its work in the heart. While the gospel is never a quick fix, it is the only power that can truly help. Nothing else is effective at bringing about God-pleasing growth and change in the child of God. Correct, effectual, and God-pleasing preaching, therefore, is only accomplished when the gospel is presented *unconditionally and for the proper reason*, and then allowed to do its work in the human heart as God promised it would (Isa. 55:10-11). The gospel dispenses the forgiveness of our sins, creates and preserves saving faith in the Savior, and thereby solves our sin problem. That is how we are to present it, and that is what we should expect it to do.

Is it then wrong to say that it is the gospel that produces good works in the life of the Christian? Certainly not. It is the gospel alone that does so by bringing to life the new man in the Christian, which new man then proceeds to do good works naturally and without coercion. Can a pastor then expect that

when he preaches the gospel unconditionally, the gospel will thus produce fruits of faith in the lives of those Christians who hear it? Without question he can, for wherever faith is created, good works will follow.

However, it is also true that Jesus did not come to earth to correct our behavior; He came to save us from the guilt, the punishment, and the bondage of our sin. The various problems and shortcomings in the lives of God's children are only rightly corrected when the new man is "put on" and dominates the Christian heart. And so we acknowledge that the gospel not only produces saving faith; it gives birth to the new man in the believer's heart. These are simultaneous events and intertwined creations. One's saving faith in conjunction with his new man naturally produces feelings of thankfulness, along with all other good works. And Christian thankfulness will always seek an outlet to express itself. Yet we dare never portray such thankfulness as either the source or the power that produces other fruits in the life of the Christian.

Appealing to a debt of thanksgiving on the part of the individual Christian (as that which should motivate him) effectively shifts the emphasis from the power of God working in us through the Word to a subjective feeling of gratitude in the heart of man. It can easily turn the gospel into yet another law. Human gratitude, even in the Christian, is fickle and unreliable. We do not want to hold this up to our people as that which ought to drive or impel them.

The inevitable result of trying to create a debt of thanksgiving as a means of motivating our people is twofold: we not only mix law and gospel, but also effectively substitute emotion for that which knows no substitute—immersion in the Word of God. The subtle, albeit false, logic is that if I point out what Jesus has done, I can then appeal to the expected human emotion of gratitude to accomplish what I want to accomplish or correct what I want to correct.

The bottom line which all Christians face is that as sinner-saints we are in constant need of putting off the old man and putting on the new, day by day, moment by moment. The only way to put on the new man (and thus build up the Christian to be what God wants him to be) is for the child of God to feast regularly on the Word of God and rely on the gospel he hears to be the power of God that builds him up.<sup>12</sup> There simply is no substitute for immersing ourselves in the Word, for there the Holy Spirit has promised to meet with us, heal us, enlighten us, give us wisdom, comfort, and hope, and empower us to live as He directs. To promote our own subjective feelings of thankfulness as that which can first prompt and then accomplish good things gives a wrong impression at best, and at worst degrades the unconditional nature of the gospel. Such feelings of gratitude are certainly present in every Christian heart, but those very feelings flow always and naturally from the new man within us.

The only solution is to preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as it was meant to be preached—as our Lord preached it and as the apostles preached it—unconditionally and without reservation or demand. Do not think of the gospel as a means to bring about good works, nor present it as such. Banish from preaching and witnessing such thoughts as "*Now if you are truly thankful for what Jesus has done, you will . . .*" or "*Motivated now by your feelings of gratitude, you must . . .*" Rightly dividing the Word of truth calls for us to elevate the gospel from "fault corrector" or "behavior modifier" to that which brings sinners to life and sustains the new man within them. An expected result of preaching the gospel, then, is that the new man is put on and renewed in the believer's heart. In turn, all manner of fruits then flow naturally from that new man, including thanksgiving. Tie nothing on the back of the good news of sins forgiven, and trust that this pure gospel will work to strengthen the Christian and thereby produce magnificent fruits of faith in the life of the child of God. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. That gospel carries the power of the Spirit to bring the sinner to life in Christ Jesus. Our calling is not only to trust in that power, but to proclaim it as our Lord intended. We have accomplished this goal when our members leave our church services,

not burdened by the idea of an unpaid debt or wracked by guilt over failures of the past, but filled instead with the incomparable joy of a debt paid for them and sins forgiven by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Also Phil. 2:13: “It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

<sup>2</sup> In the two passages cited Paul uses an aorist middle form of ἐνδύω (a participle ἐνδυσάμενοι and an infinitive ἐνδύσασθαι). According to the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon (BDAG 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), the middle voice forms of ἐνδύω mean “to put any kind of thing on oneself” and can be translated *clothe oneself in, put on, wear*. In the usage of the New Testament, middle voice forms occur numerous times in a literal context of wearing clothing. Paul, however, often uses the middle (or passive) forms metaphorically. In addition to the two verses under consideration, cf. his usage in Rom. 13:12 (“let us put on the armor of light”), Eph. 6:11 (“put on the whole armor of God”), Eph. 6:14 (“having put on the breastplate of righteousness”), 1 Thess. 5:8 (“putting on the breastplate of faith and love”), 1 Cor. 15:53-54 (“put on incorruption . . . immortality”), Col. 3:12 (“put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering”), Rom. 13:14 (“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”), and Gal. 3:27 (“baptized into Christ have put on Christ”).

<sup>3</sup> One potential exception that may come to mind is Col. 3:10: “. . . the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.” A key issue pertaining to the underlined words is the matter of Paul’s meaning; noting that ἀνακαλινοῦμενον is a present participle, how is it that the new man is “renewed in knowledge?” In the opinion of the writer, the present participle may have an iterative force, similar to the iterative force of the present indicative form ἀνακαλινοῦται in 2 Cor. 4:16 (“. . . yet the inward man is being renewed day by day”). The iterative sense in these passages is in line with the expression contained in Luther’s *Small Catechism*: “that the new man should daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

<sup>4</sup> In searching the Scriptures for pertinent and instructive examples, we must also abide by the hermeneutical principle that a mere example in the Bible—be it a concrete case or historical event—is not necessarily indicating what the Lord’s will is for all believers. Each example must be weighed in its context and historical setting with the purpose of determining if an underlying principle is clearly demonstrated by that example. Examples found in the Bible typically illustrate principles of Scripture stated elsewhere and show how those principles are to be applied to a given situation.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 119:32: “I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart.”

<sup>6</sup> In the Greek text of this second class conditional sentence (εἰ ἡγαπᾷτέ με ἐχάρητε ἂν ὅτι πορεύομαι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, ὅτι ὁ πατήρ μείζων μου ἐστίν), we identify the protasis as having εἰ with the imperfect ἡγαπᾷτε and the apodosis as having ἂν with the aorist indicative ἐχάρητε.

<sup>7</sup> The notable exception to this opening word of thanksgiving is Galatians, in which Paul immediately addressed the serious matter of how the gospel he had presented to the Galatians was being perverted among them.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent treatment of this passage, the reader may refer to August Pieper’s article “The Law Is Not Made for a Righteous Man,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. 2, pages 73-100.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also Romans 8:7-8: “The carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the NRS on this passage: “And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves. . . .”

<sup>11</sup> As borne out by many lexicons, the basic and most common meaning of συνέχω is to “hold together.” The BDAG lexicon has the following as viable Koine definitions and *glosses* for συνέχω: “1. to hold together as a unit, *hold together, sustain*; 2. to close by holding together, *stop, shut*; 3. to press in and around so as to leave little room for movement, *press hard, crowd*; 4. to hold in custody, *guard*; 5. to cause distress by force of circumstances, *seize, attack, distress, torment*; 6. to occupy someone’s attention intensely, pass. *be occupied with, be absorbed in*; 7. to provide impulse for some activity, *urge on, impel*; 8. to hold within bounds so as to manage or guide, *direct, control*.” Notice how the meanings *urge on, impel, direct, and control* are listed near the end. There should be a compelling exegetical reason to reject one of the earlier, more frequently used meanings in favor of one of these.

<sup>12</sup> In regard to our need for putting off the old man and putting on the new, the words of Luther are to the point: “The old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance and die with all sins and evil desires. It also means that a new Man should daily appear and arise, who lives eternally before God in righteousness and purity” (“What is the meaning of this baptism with water?”, *Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, Sydow edition, p. 10).

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### **Book Reviews**

**Robert J. Koester: *Gospel Motivation—More Than “Jesus Died for My Sins,”* Northwestern Publishing House, 2006, paperback, 191 pages.**

The main benefit of Koester’s book is that it will help us work our way through the New Testament Epistles so that we present the gospel as the apostles did and motivate Christian behavior as the apostles did. The author says in his Foreword (“Why Think about Gospel Motivation?”): “In our efforts to keep justification and sanctification (faith and life) in their proper places—that is, to properly divide God’s Word of Truth—we lose sight of how intimately bound together they are. The apostles did not divide things like that. . . . Their books speak about how Christians should live, but all their discussions about life are sprinkled with reminders of what we have become in Christ. The law, the gospel, and our life in Christ are all interwoven. Nothing is omitted. Everything is in perfect balance. . . . What a blessing when pastors, in their sermons and Bible studies, imitate the apostles’ way of speaking and when all God’s people learn to speak that way in conversations with fellow Christians” (p. 7).

In order to help the reader see the interweaving of law and gospel and our life in Christ, Koester uses boldface type for the **gospel motivation** contained in the NIV passages he quotes, and he uses italics for the *specific aspect of sanctification* expressed by the writer within that same passage. For example, in the first passage he discusses, Titus 3:3-8, he has the gospel verses 4-7 printed in boldface and the sanctification verse 8 printed in italics. To give our readers a sample of how it looks in print, we offer a similar kind of formatting of the same section from the New King James Version:

For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. **But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.** *This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.*

Koester’s point in using this format is that the gospel of Christ is so big in the thoughts of the apostles that they keep on referring to it even when they are discussing the Christian life. The gospel dominated everything that they wrote.

What Koester senses as a weakness in himself and others is that they tend to present the gospel in the same way over and over again: “Jesus died for your sins. Therefore . . .” Koester goes on to say: “This is not necessarily wrong. The problem is, however, that it often misses the beauty and fullness of how the apostles speak. It misses how the writers weave together justification and sanctification and, in a single sentence, can ground us in the former and encourage us in the latter. It is good to read Jesus and the apostles not just to find passages that back up our Lutheran teaching but to seek to imitate their way of speaking” (p. 166).

The familiar mission hymn of Daniel March encourages us all to speak up for Christ, regardless of our abilities: “If you cannot speak like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus,

you can say He died for all” (*TLH* 496:2). I do not think Koester would disagree with this thought. But he does encourage us all, especially pastors, to study the writings of Paul and the other apostles so carefully that we will begin to preach like Paul. Personally, I have found it helpful for my own understanding of the New Testament Epistles to use the non-festival half of the church year to preach through a portion of a New Testament Epistle Sunday after Sunday. And what better topic for Bible class can there be than a detailed study of an Epistle in order to see how the apostles proclaimed the gospel and encouraged the Christian life.

In his conclusion Koester says: “Scripture alone gives us the way God wants us to grow in faith. The gospel is to be the center of our lives. We grow in piety because we have a hope centered in Christ. We grow in holy living the more we realize how wonderful God’s love is. We grow in our ability to serve the more the new man is built up through the knowledge of its freedom from the law” (p. 169).

Since we all are tempted merely to *use* the gospel to try to accomplish something that to us is more important than the gospel, Koester’s book is helpful in reminding us how *big* the gospel is. I would like to see all of our pastors obtain this book with the aim of using it to encourage a thoughtful restudy of the New Testament Epistles, so that God and His gospel of forgiveness in Christ Jesus may be glorified by what we preach and how we live.

**John T. Pless: *Handling the Word of Truth—Law and Gospel in the Church Today*, Concordia Publishing House, 2004, paperback, 128 pages.**

I am quite sure that all of our pastors are familiar with *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* by C. F. W. Walther. Perhaps many of them have also followed the advice given by their seminary professors that they study it anew every year in their ministry. But is it possible that Walther’s presentation could also be the subject of an adult Bible class in our congregations? Many would say, I believe, that Walther’s book is too heavy, too deep, too lengthy for a Bible class in our day and age. John Pless, an LC-MS professor at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has written *Handling the Word of Truth* as a tool by which pastors can bring Walther’s studies to the ordinary Christian in the pew.

Each brief chapter begins with the quotation of one or more of the twenty-five theses on law and gospel that Walther presented. Then Pless examines Walther’s point on the basis of the Scriptures, quotations from Walther, Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and from modern authors as well, showing how important the teaching is also in our day. Each chapter then concludes with a series of questions for personal reflection and group discussion.

Since many of the popular Evangelical writers and preachers of our time have very little understanding of the distinction between law and gospel, Pless injects timely warnings against these misleading teachers. For example, one of the best-selling Christian books of our time has been Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Pless points out that Rick Warren “holds before his readers the promise that their lives will have less stress, increased satisfaction, simplified decisions, and will be prepared for eternity if they follow his forty-day pattern of biblical directives. The commands of the Law are held up to urge Christians to perform. The focus is off of the Gospel and on our ability to reshape our attitudes and behavior” (pp. 107-108).

In response Pless quotes Scripture, Luther, Walther, the Formula of Concord, and an old Lutheran hymn, and states: “When the Law is preached to the unregenerate in an attempt to make them godly, it actually has the opposite effect. When the Law is mishandled in this way, it results in frustration and deepened defiance of God in the hearer, or it seduces the hearer into a false security that once sinful behaviors are under control one is right with God. . . . The end result is the same because in both cases

God is not trusted as the Savior. Self-righteousness is simply another form of unrighteousness, for ‘by the words of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin’ (Romans 3:20). It is the Gospel, not the Law, that gives birth to the new life of faith. The Gospel alone enlivens believers for the life of good works. . . . Sanctification comes not from the power of the Law but from the living words of the Gospel, words that take root in the heart and produce good fruits on the lips and in the lives of those who through faith are righteous” (pp. 108-109).

Pless understands that our country is saturated with immorality in so many different ways. We can mention abortion, homosexuality, feminism, and open fornication as areas in which God’s standards are almost totally abandoned in our time. Certainly we need to bring God’s Word of law to bear in these matters and let it stand unaltered as “a Word from God that convicts and condemns of sin.” However, as Pless goes on to say, “there is the temptation for Christians to focus on morality. The chief aim of the church is thought to be producing a culture that runs counter to that of our world, a culture defined by biblical values. The Gospel is pressed into the service of the Law. It becomes a means to morality, not a word from God that forgives sin for Jesus’ sake” (p. 8).

An appendix to the book prints a sermon by Martin Luther (dated January 1, 1532) on the distinction between law and gospel. Surely one of the greatest blessings of the Reformation is that by God’s grace Luther was enabled to perceive the difference between law and gospel, which the Holy Spirit Himself teaches us in Scripture, and that the knowledge of this difference rescued Luther from his doubts and despair.

Today we pastors need these same insights for ourselves and for our members. As a means to gain these insights and apply them in our congregations, this little book by Pless is highly recommended. In thirteen chapters there is enough material for at least thirteen weeks of Bible classes on this very important, essential, and timeless topic.

**Carl Manthey Zorn: *The Psalms—A Devotional Commentary*, Northwestern Publishing House, 2005, hard cover, 725 pages, translation by John F. Sullivan, foreword by Editor Robert J. Koester.**

In his retirement Pastor H. C. Duehlmeier, of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, spent a considerable portion of his time translating some of the German writings of Carl Manthey Zorn. As a result of Duehlmeier’s efforts some of our readers have become familiar with Zorn’s commentary on Galatians and his tract on the certainty of salvation through Christ. Who is this man, and why are his writings still being translated today, even though he died in 1928?

Robert Koester’s foreword to Zorn’s devotional commentary on the Psalms details the interesting life of the author. Born in Germany in 1846, Zorn rejected Christianity at an early age and told his mother that the Bible was an obsolete book. His university training by rationalistic teachers confirmed him in his atheism, even though he became a student of theology and trained to be a pastor. But the Holy Spirit began to work on him, and after some terrible days of being convicted under God’s judgment and experiencing horrible bouts of anxiety and near despair, Zorn was brought to faith in Christ. Koester explains: “God sometimes lets a person wallow in his unbelief, rebellion, and guilt for a long time before showing him his wretchedness and then leading him to know his Savior” (p. vii). Zorn was then sent to India as a missionary, but the church in which he was working was unionistic, and for conscience’ sake he had to leave it. After becoming acquainted with the Missouri Synod and C. F. W. Walther, he came to the United States and served as a pastor in Sheboygan, Wisconsin and Cleveland, Ohio. The Wauwatosa theologians of the Wisconsin Synod thought highly of him, and when he died, August Pieper wrote a biography of 73 pages in the Wisconsin Synod theological journal at that time, the *Quartalschrift*.

John F. Sullivan, father of Immanuel Lutheran College professor Paul Sullivan, translated Zorn's commentary on the Psalms before his death in 2001. Earlier he had translated Zorn's devotional book *Manna*.

The English edition of Zorn's commentary prints the entire text of the 150 Psalms according to the New International Version. Zorn's comments are not technical but devotional, intended for the ordinary Christian reader. There are many Scripture references simply given in parentheses. If one were to read all of these, one would undoubtedly get a pretty complete theology. Zorn looks at the Psalms from the perspective of a New Testament reader, and he finds Christ everywhere. In this respect modern commentators would undoubtedly disagree with his presentation. Zorn, however, makes a strong case for understanding many of the Psalms as prophecies of Christ. In this respect he imitates Martin Luther, whom he often quotes. Interspersed with Zorn's comments are well-chosen hymn stanzas from either *The Lutheran Hymnal* or *Christian Worship*.

All the Psalms are given titles. The title for Psalm 1 is "The Difference between the Righteous and the Wicked." In the second sentence of his comments Zorn already introduces Christ, saying on page 1: "There are those whom God regards as righteous in view of their faith in Jesus Christ; they serve God. On the other hand are those who reject Jesus Christ and despise God. Both types of persons also can be found within Christian congregations (Matthew 13:47-50)." He concludes his comments on Psalm 1 with a familiar verse from hymn 376 of *Christian Worship*: "Jesus, your blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress; Mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head."

It is abundantly evident that this commentary is more than an exposition of the text of the Psalms. So often it becomes a Christian devotion based on the words of the Old Testament Psalm, but expanding on it to include the clearest gospel expressed in the New Testament, with many other Scripture passages introduced by way of explanation.

Sometimes the commentary is much more specific about the contents of a certain Psalm than one might expect. For example, Psalm 10 is entitled "Prayer against the Church's Archenemy," and following Luther's lead, Zorn says that this Psalm is directed against the Antichrist. The reader is then led to Scripture texts that deal with the Antichrist in Daniel, 2 Thessalonians, 1 John, and Revelation. Of course, Zorn does not hesitate to tell us that the Antichrist is the "Roman antichrist," and that we should pray against him continually. "He is still here, even though he has been harmed by Luther's pure preaching about Christ" (p. 33). The commentary on Psalm 10 concludes with the three stanzas of Luther's hymn, "Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word" (*CW* 203), which Luther wrote against the Turk (Islam) and the pope.

I have been reading a page or two of this book every morning for quite a few months (but must confess that I have not looked up all the Scripture references). I agree with the author when he says in his introduction: "Oh, the psalms are too little known, understood, and treasured by pastors and Christians in general" (p. xii). We have our favorites, of course, and we go back to them again and again, as well we should. But there is much more in the Psalms for us to investigate and meditate upon. Zorn's book will help us do that, and for that reason I recommend it. We may be surprised at how often we find Christ there!

David Lau