

Excerpts From
Luther's Epistle Sermons:
Advent and Christmas Season

Note: These excerpts are condensed, and each bold-faced verse represents an excerpt from a separate sermon.

"Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then shall each man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5)

We may well ask, Are we not to give praise to one another? Paul says, *"In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another"* (Rom. 12:10). And Christ, *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven"* (Matt. 5:16). And the apostle also tells us that we must here upon earth walk *"by evil report and good report"* (2 Cor. 6:8). But it is our faith alone and not our works that is the chief thing to be honored in all cases. Good works are imperative, and we should extol them in others. But no one is to be judged, justified, or preferred because of them. The farmer at his plow sometimes may be better in God's sight than the chaste nun.

The five foolish virgins (Matt. 25:2), despite their virginity, are condemned. The widow who threw into the treasury two mites (Mark 12:42) did more than all the others who cast in much greater amounts. The work of the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7:37) is extolled above any work of the Pharisees. It is impossible for us mortals to discern the relative merits of individuals and the value of their works. We ought to praise all, giving equal honors and not preferring one above another. We should humble ourselves before one another, ever esteeming our neighbor above ourselves. Then we are to leave it to God to judge who ranks first. True, he has declared that whoever humbles himself shall be exalted; yet it is not evident who humbles and who exalts himself, for the heart by which God judges is not manifest. One may humble himself when secretly in his heart he is haughty; and again, the meek-hearted may exalt himself.

So Paul says, *"The Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the hearts."* Then it will appear who is really worthier, superior and better, and whose works excel.

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"Let your forbearance [moderation] be known to all men" (Phil. 4:5)

Having instructed the Corinthians concerning their conduct toward God--their duty to serve him with joyful hearts--Paul proceeds briefly to teach them how to conduct themselves before men: *"Let your moderation be known unto all men."* In other words, rejoice always before God, but before men be forbearing. Direct your life so as to do and suffer everything not contrary to the commandments of God in order that you may make yourselves universally agreeable. Not only

refrain from offending any, but put the best possible construction upon the conduct of others. Aim to be clearly recognized as men indifferent to circumstances, as content whether you be hit or missed, and holding to no privilege at all liable to bring you into conflict or produce discord. With the rich be rich, with the poor, poor. Rejoice with the joyful, weep with the mourning. Finally, be all things to all men, compelling them to confess you always agreeable, uniformly pleasant to mankind, and on a level with everyone. . . .

For the sake of a better understanding, let us illustrate. Paul says, *"I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some"* (1 Cor. 9:22). That is, Paul ate and drank with the Jews according to the law and generally conducted himself in harmony with its requirements, though he was not obliged so to do. He also ate and drank with the Gentiles regardless of the law and conducted himself without respect to its requirements and as the custom of the Gentiles. For only faith and love are requisite; all else man is free to omit or to observe. Therefore, for the sake of one, all laws may be observed; for another, omitted. Observance must be adapted to the individual case. . . .

The same rule applies to all external institutions and ordinances, as monastic vows and rules. They are in themselves but a matter of choice and are not opposed to faith or love. We should maintain the privilege of observing them in love and liberty for the sake of our associates, to preserve harmony with them. But when it is insisted that certain ordinances must be honored, that their observance is an act of obedience essential to salvation, [then] we should forsake cloisters, tonsures, caps, vows and rules, and even take the opposite course, by way of testifying that only faith and love are the Christian essentials and it is our privilege to observe or omit all other things, being controlled by love and our associations. To conform to laws in a spirit of love and liberty works no harm, but to conform through necessity and forced obedience is to be condemned. Let this rule apply to ceremonials, hymns, prayers and all other Cathedral ordinances so long as they are observed as a matter of love and liberty alone. Only for the service and for the enjoyment of the assembled company are they to be observed, and that when they are works not in themselves evil. When urged as inherently essential, we are to refrain. We must oppose them in order to maintain the liberty of faith. . . .

But again, when civil government enjoins laws and demands tribute, we should freely serve even though we are constrained. In this case our liberty and faith are not endangered. For civil government does not claim that observance of its laws is essential to salvation but essential to civil dominion and protection. In submitting to it, then, conscience maintains its liberty, and faith is not impaired. To whatever does not do violence to our faith and benefits others, we should fully conform.

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"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12).

The foremost evil of men is their godlessness, their unsaved state, their lack of grace. It includes first a faithless heart, and then all resultant thoughts, words, works, and conduct in general. Left to himself, the individual's inner life and outward conduct are guided only by his natural

abilities and human reason. In these his beauty and brilliance sometimes outshine that of the real saints. But he seeks merely his own interest. He is unable to honor God in life and conduct, even though he does command greater praise and glory in the exercise of reason than do the true saints of frequent Scripture mention. So worldwide and so deeply subtle an evil is this godless, graceless conduct, it withholds from the individual the power to perceive the evil of his way, to believe he errs even when his error is held up to him. The prophet (Ps. 32:2) looks upon this blindness as not that of reason or of the world or of the flesh, but as a spiritual deception, leading astray not only the reason but the spirit of men. In fact, that such ungodliness is sinful must be believed rather than felt.

Paul terms the other evil in man "worldly lusts." Therein is comprehended all disorderly conduct of which the individual may be guilty in regards to himself and his neighbor. The first evil--ungodliness--comprehends all wrongs toward God.

Observe Paul's judicious choice of words--"lusts," "worldly lusts." By the use of "worldly" he would include all evil lusts, whether it be for goods, luxuries, honor, favors, and anything of the world wherein one may lustfully sin. He does not say, however, that we must deny ourselves worldly *goods*, or must not make use of them. They are good creations of God. We must avail ourselves of food, drink, clothing, and other necessities of life. No such thing is forbidden. It is only the lust after them, the undue love and craving for them that we must deny, for it leads us into all sins against ourselves and our neighbors.

In this expression is also condemned the conduct of godless hypocrites who, though they may be clad in sheep's clothing and sometimes refrain from an evil deed through cowardice, or shame, or fear of hell's punishment, are nevertheless filled with evil desires for wealth, honor, and power. No one loves life more dearly, fears death more terribly, and desires more ardently to remain in this world than they. Yet they fail to recognize the worldly lusts wherein they are drowned, and their many works are vainly performed. It is not enough to put away worldly works and speech. Worldly desires, or lusts, must be removed. . . .

Further, Paul speaks of "denying" or renouncing [them]. Therein he rejects many foolish expedients devised by men for attaining righteousness. Some run to the wilderness, some into cloisters. Others separate themselves from society, presuming by bodily flight to run away from ungodliness and worldly lusts. Yet others resort to tortures [personal discomforts] and injuries of the body, imposing upon themselves excessive hunger, thirst, wakefulness, labor, uncomfortable apparel. Now if ungodliness and worldly lusts were but something painted upon the wall, you might escape them by running out of the house. If they were knit into a red coat, you might pull off the coat and don a gray one. Did they grow in your hair, you might have it shaved off and wear a bald pate. Were they baked in the bread, you might eat roots instead. But since they inhere in your heart and permeate you through and through, to where can you flee that you will not carry them with you? . . . To run away from them would necessitate first fleeing from yourself. James says, "*Each man is tempted when he is driven away by his own lust and enticed*" (James 1:14). . . .

We read of an ancient father who, unable to endure temptation in a cloister, left it that he might in the wilderness serve God in peace. But in the desert one day his little water jug overturned. He set it up, but it overturned a second time. Becoming enraged, he dashed the vessel into

pieces. Then saying with himself, "Since I cannot find peace when alone, the defect must be in myself," he returned to the cloister to suffer temptations, from that time forward teaching that we must obtain the victory not by fleeing worldly lusts but by denying them.

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"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1,2)

Hebrews is a strong, forcible, noble epistle, preeminently and emphatically teaching the great article of faith concerning the Godhead, or the divinity of Christ. . . . Now, the object of the epistle is to establish and promote faith in the divinity of Christ, and, as already stated, scarce [hardly] any portion of the Bible more strongly enforces this article of our creed. . . .

Paul contrasts the ancient preachers and disciples with those of later times. The prophets and Christ are the preachers, the fathers and ourselves the disciples. The Son, the Lord himself, speaks unto us. His servants the prophets spoke unto the fathers. If the fathers believed the servants, [then] how much more readily would they have believed the Lord himself! And if we believe not the Lord, [then] how much more reluctant would we have been to believe the servants! Thus he makes one condition argue for the other: our unbelief contrasted with the faith of the fathers is an awful disgrace; again, the faith of the fathers in contrast with our unbelief is deserving of very great honor.

Our disgrace is yet greater when we recall the fact that God spoke to the fathers not only once but at different times, and not only in one way but in different ways, and yet they always believed; while we are not induced by their example to believe even in one instance the message of the Lord himself.

The phrase "at the end of these days" [in these last days] is significant. From now to the end no other manner of preaching is to be adopted. This is the last time he purposes to speak, and the last method he will employ. He has commanded--left on record--that this Word, and only this, is to be preached until the end. Paul says, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes*" (1 Cor. 11:26). He also arrests their expectation when he says "in these days." They are not to look for other days to come. The days when he speaks for the last time and in the last manner are already at hand.

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"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen . . . disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. They they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'" (Acts 6:8-11).

It is necessary to the understanding of this epistle lesson to introduce something of what is omitted and to present in connection with the narrative the things which gave rise to it. The

dispute arose from Stephen's assertion that whatsoever proceeds not from faith does not profit, and that men cannot serve God by the erection of churches or by works independent of faith in Jesus Christ. Faith alone renders us godly; faith alone builds the temple of God--the believing hearts. The Jews opposed the doctrine of faith, adducing the law of Moses and the temple at Jerusalem; for the Bible makes frequent mention of Jerusalem as God's chosen city, toward which his eyes are always directed, a city called the house of God. Such argument they presumed to be conclusive.

Stephen, however, opposes them by citing Isaiah 66:1-2: *"Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist, says the LORD [Yahweh]."* This statement is clear and forcible beyond gainsaying [dispute]. It shows [that] God does not dwell in houses made with hands, for the essential elements of these are, in the first place, of his own creating and belong to him. Further, if [neither] heaven nor earth can contain him--and he here asserts that heaven is not his house but his throne, and the earth not his habitation but his footstool--how [then] can he be expected to dwell in a house made by men? (Solomon speaks to the same purpose in 1 Kings 8:27, referring to the house he has himself built.)

Defeated by the power of this passage from Isaiah, and similar citations they could not gainsay, the Jews proceeded to misconstrue Stephen's words, making out that he declared Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs of Moses. Yet Stephen had no intention of giving such impression. He simply asserted that we are saved not by the law or the temple but by faith in Jesus Christ; and that having faith we may rightly observe the Law, whether there be [a] temple or not. Stephen's purpose was merely to remove the Jews' false confidence in their own works and in the temple.

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"But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (Gal. 3:23-25)

The youth under a tutor follows not his own will but, from fear of the rod, his master's will. While under control of his master, his real character cannot be detected. Were he free, his true self would be apparent, for he would manifest his natural disposition, and his works would be his own. The works he performs under restraint and coercion are not really his own but those of the tutor who forces them. Were he not under control of the tutor he would do none of them, but rather things quite the reverse.

In this homely but apt illustration, Paul presents at once the province of the Law and the limitation of free will, or human nature, with a clearness not to be surpassed. It plainly teaches the meaning, operation, and end of the Law, and the extent of human nature's power.

We note that constraint has a twofold effect upon the youth. First, fear of his tutor preserves him from many evils into which he would otherwise fall. He is withheld from indulging in a wicked, licentious life, in becoming utterly dissolute. Second, his heart is filled with hatred

toward the tutor who curbs his will. This is the situation with him: the greater his external restraint from evil, the greater his inward hatred of him who restrains. . . . We know from experience that those youths most strictly reared are, when given liberty, more wicked than young men less rigidly brought up. To improve human nature with commandments and punishments is so impossible that something else is necessary.

Likewise, so long as man is in his natural state and destitute of grace, he does not do what he would but does what his tutor the Law obliges him to do. It must be confessed by all that were it not for hell and the Law's penalties, no one would do good. Now, man's works being not wrought of free will, they are not his own; they are the works of the coercive and restraining Law. Well may the apostle declare them not our works but the "works of the Law," because what we do against our will is not our achievement but that of the constraining power.

For instance, should one forcibly make my hand the instrument to slay another, or to bestow alms upon a destitute individual, it would not be my deed though performed by my hand, but it would be the deed of him who forced the action. Consequently I would be neither injured nor benefited in the least by the act. Likewise, the works of the Law render no one righteous, notwithstanding man performs them. For, so far as our will is concerned, we do them merely from fear of the Law's penalty. The will would much prefer to do otherwise, and would, if not constrained by the coercive and menacing Law.

Further, one may not, or may think he does not, do works through fear of punishment. He is, however, inspired by the promises and inducements of the Law. And that motive is as wrong, if not more so, than the other. Such a position implies that if heaven were not promised, if they knew there were no reward, no effort would be made. The deeds wrought from this latter motive are, therefore, likewise not our own. They are the works of the Law with its inducements in the nature of favors and rewards. . . .

Thus we find with all men two effects of the Law. First, by that tutor they are secured against shameful, dissolute conduct. Under the discipline of the works of the Law they maintain a honorable outward life. Second, in their hearts they really become enemies to the Law with its penalties; and the more severe the chastisement, the greater their hatred. . . .

God wills that our good works should be really our own, not those of our tutor the Law, or of death, hell or heaven. That is, we are not to act from a fear of death or hell, or for the sake of enjoying heaven, but from a willing spirit, a desire and love for righteousness. He who does a good deed through fear of death and hell does it not to the honor of God. It is a work of death and hell, for they have extorted it. It is because of these that he has worked; otherwise he would not have done the deed. Therefore he remains a servant, a slave of death and hell, so long as these inspire his works. Now, if he remains their servant, he must die and be condemned. . . .

Here, indeed, is evident the necessity for the Law and the purpose it serves--God's design in it--its office being twofold. First, to preserve discipline among us; to impel us to an honorable outward life, a life in which we can dwell together without devouring one another, as we would were Law, fear, and punishment lacking Second, God's design in the Law is to enable man to know himself; to perceive the false and unjustified state of his heart; to discover how far he is from God and how utterly impotent his own nature is; to disdain his own goodness and to

recognize it as nothing in comparison to what is necessary to the fulfillment of the Law; to be humbled in consequence of such knowledge and come to the cross yearning for Christ, longing for his grace, despairing of himself and placing all his hope in Christ. . . .

Mankind conducts itself in three ways with reference to the Law. Some disregard it utterly, and boldly oppose it by a dissolute life. To them it is practically no Law. Others, because of the Law, refrain from such a course and are preserved to an honorable life. But while outwardly they live within the Law's prohibitions, inwardly they are enemies of this their tutor. The motive of all their conduct is the fear of death and hell. They keep the Law only externally; [or to state it another way], rather it keeps them externally. Inwardly they neither keep it nor are kept by it. The third class observe it both externally and with the heart.

"But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law." Paul does not say that before faith came we were righteous and kept the Law. On the contrary, he says that the Law kept us. Under it we were locked up--preserved--that we might not boldly and independently rush into wickedness. At the same time, the restraint did not render us really and inwardly righteous. Nor was it designed to be permanent. It led to the faith to be revealed in the future, a faith which was to set us free; not free to do the evil from which the Law shut us up, but free to do the good to which the Law impelled us. The "shutting up," the confinement of the Law, should teach us to desire faith and to recognize the evil tendencies of our nature, for faith is a spiritual freedom liberating only the heart.

To illustrate. Suppose you were confined in a prison where you were very reluctant to remain. Your captor might release you in either of two ways. First, he might give you physical freedom by destroying the prison and letting you go where you desire. Second, he might make you mentally free by bestowing many blessings upon you in this prison--illuminating and enlarging it; making it pleasant in the extreme; adorning it richly and to an extent that rendered it more desirable than any royal palace and more to be desired even than a kingdom; and by so reconciling you to your surroundings, so altering your mind, that you would not be removed from that prison for all earthly possessions, but would pray for its preservation that you might continue therein, it being to you no longer a prison but having become a paradise. Tell me, which form of freedom would be the better? Would not the latter be preferable?

Christ has given us spiritual freedom from the Law. He did not abrogate, did not destroy the Law; but he changed the heart, which before was unwillingly under the Law. He so benefited it and made the Law so desirable that the heart has no greater delight and joy than in the Law.

Excerpts from *Luther's Epistle Sermons, Advent and Christmas Season*, vol. I, translated by John Nicholas Lenker (The Luther Press: Minneapolis, 1908). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized, and the NKJV has been used for most Scripture quotations.