

Exhortation to Walk as Christians

by Martin Luther

When God was about to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he commanded, shortly before their departure, that they should eat the Passover the night they started; and as a perpetual memorial of their redemption, they were annually, on the recurrence of the season, to celebrate the feast of Easter for seven days. A specially urgent feature of the command was that on the first evening of the feast they must put out of their houses all leaven and leavened bread, and during the seven days eat none but the unleavened bread, or cakes. Hence the evangelists speak of the feast as the Feast (or Days) of Unleavened Bread. Mk. 14, 1; Lk. 22, 1.

Paul, in this lesson, explains the figure in brief but beautiful and expressive words. He is prompted to introduce the subject by the fact that in the preceding verses of this chapter he has been reproving the Corinthians for their disposition to boast of the Gospel and of Christ while abusing such liberty unto unchastity and other sins. He admonishes them that, possessing the Gospel and having become Christians, they ought, as becomes Christians, to live according to the Gospel, avoiding everything not consistent with the faith and with Christian character--everything not befitting them as new creatures.

So the apostle uses the figure of the Paschal lamb and unleavened bread requisite at the Jews' Feast of the Passover, in his effort to point the Corinthians to the true character and purpose of the New Testament made with us in the kingdom of Christ. He explains what is the true Paschal Lamb and what the unleavened bread, and how to observe the real Passover, wherein all must be new and spiritual. In the joy and wealth of his mind he presents this analogy to remind them that they are Christians and to consider what that means.

His meaning is: Being Christians and God's true people, and called upon to observe a Passover, you must go about it in the right way, putting away from you all remaining leaven until it shall have been purged out utterly. What Paul means by "leaven" is told later in his phrase "neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness"; he means whatever is evil and wicked. Everything foreign to Christianity in both doctrine, or faith, and life, is "leaven." From all this Paul would have Christians purge themselves with the same thoroughness with which the leaven was to be put away from their Easter according to the law. And, holding to the figure, he would have us observe our Passover in the use of the sweet bread, which, in distinction from the leaven, signifies sincerity and truth, or a nature and life completely new.

The text, then, is but an admonition to upright Christian works, directed to those who have heard the Gospel and learned to know Christ. This is what Paul figuratively calls partaking of the true unleavened bread--or wafers or cakes. We Germans have borrowed our word "cakes" from the phraseology of the Jewish Church, abbreviating "oblaten," wafers, into "fladen," or cakes. How else should we gentiles get the idea of cakes on Easter, when at our Passover we, by faith, eat the Paschal Lamb, Christ? We are admonished to partake of the true unleavened bread that life and conduct may accord with faith in Christ, whom we have learned to know. Paul's admonition begins:

"Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?"

This by way of introducing the succeeding admonitions. Leaven is a common figure with the apostle, one he uses frequently, almost proverbially; employing it, too, in his epistle to the Galatians (ch 5, 9). Christ, also, gives us a Scripture parable of the leaven. Mt 13, 33. It is the nature of leaven that a small quantity mixed with a lump of dough will pervade and fill the whole lump until its own acid nature has been

inparted to it. This Paul makes a figure of spiritual things as regards both doctrine and life.

In Galatians 5, 9 he makes it more especially typify false doctrine. For it is just as true that the introduction of an error in an article of faith will soon work injury to the whole and result in the loss of Christ. Thus it was with the Galatians. The one thing insisted upon by the false apostles was circumcision, though they fully intended to preach the Gospel of Christ. Such innovation will pursue its course with destructive sweep until even the uncontaminated part becomes worthless; the once pure mass is wholly corrupted. The apostle writes to the Galatians (ch 5, 2): "Behold, I Paul say unto you, that, if ye receive circumcision, Christ will profit you nothing." Again (verse 4), "Ye are severed from Christ--ye are fallen away from grace." But in this text he has reference more particularly to an erroneous idea concerning life and conduct. In this instance it is likewise true that, once the flesh be allowed any license, and liberty be abused, and that under the name of the Gospel, there is introduced a leaven which will speedily corrupt faith and conscience, and continue its work until Christ and the Gospel are lost. Such would have been the fate of the Corinthians had not Paul saved them from it by this epistle admonishing and urging them to purge out the leaven of license; for they had begun to practice great wantonness, and had given rise to sects and factions which tended to subvert the one Gospel and the one faith.

This is, then, wise counsel and serious admonition, that faithful guard be maintained against the infusion or introduction into doctrine of what is false, whether it pertains to works or faith. The Word of God, faith and conscience are very delicate things. The old proverb says: "*Non patitur jocum fama, fides, oculus;*"-- Good reputation, faith and the eye--these three will bear no jest. Just as good wine or precious medicines are corrupted by a single drop of poison or other impurity, and the purer they are, the more readily defiled and poisoned; so, also, God's Word and his cause will bear absolutely no alloy. God's truth must be perfectly pure and clear, or else, it is corrupt and unprofitable. And the worst feature of the matter is, the sway and intrenchment of evil is so strong that it cannot be removed; just as leaven, however small the quantity, added to the lump of dough, soon penetrates and sours the whole lump, while it is impossible to arrest its influence or once more to sweeten the dough.

The proposal of certain wise minds to mediate, and effect a compromise, between us and our opponents of the Papacy, is wrong and useless. They would permit preaching of the Gospel but at the same time retain the Papistical abuses, advocating that these errors be not all censured and rejected, because of the weak; and that for the sake of peace and unity we should somehow moderate and restrict our demands, each party being ready to yield to the other and patiently bear with it. While in such case no perfect purity can be claimed to exist, the situation can be made endurable if discretion is used and trouble is taken to explain.

Nay, not so! For, as you hear, Paul would not mix even a small quantity of leaven with the pure lump, and God self has urgently forbidden it. The slight alloy would thoroughly penetrate and corrupt the whole. Where human additions are made to the Gospel doctrine in but a single point, the injury is done; truth is obscured and souls are led astray. Therefore, such mixture, such patchwork, in doctrine is not to be tolerated. As Christ teaches (Mt 9, 16), we must not put new cloth upon an old garment.

Nor may we in our works and in our daily life tolerate the yielding to the wantonness of the flesh and at the same boast the Gospel of Christ, as did the Corinthians, who stirred up among themselves divisions and disorder, even to the extent of one marrying his stepmother. In such matters as these, Paul says, a little leaven leavens and ruins the whole lump--the entire Christian life. These two things are not consistent with each other: to hold to the Christian faith and to live after the wantonness of the flesh, in sins and vices condemned by the conscience. Paul elsewhere warns (I Cor 6, 9-10): "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God." Again (Gal 5, 19-21): "The works of the flesh are manifest . . . of which I forewarn you, even as I did

forewarn you, that they who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

Warrant is given here likewise for censuring and restraining the rash individuals who assert that men should not be terrified by the Law, nor surrendered to Satan. No! it is our duty to teach men to purge out the old leaven; we must tell them they are not Christians, but devoid of the faith, when they yield to the wantonness of the flesh and willfully persevere in sin against the warning of conscience. We should teach that such sins are so much the more vicious and damnable when practiced under the name of the Gospel, under cover of Christian liberty; for that is despising and blaspheming the name of Christ and the Gospel: and therefore such conduct must be positively renounced and purged out, as irreconcilable with faith and a good conscience.

"Purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, even as ye are unleavened."

If we are to be a new, sweet lump, Paul says, we must purge out the old leaven. For, as stated, a nature renewed by faith and Christianity will not admit of our living as we did when devoid of faith and in sin, under the influence of an evil conscience. We cannot consistently be "a new lump" and partake of the Passover, and at the same time permit the old leaven to remain: for if the latter be not purged out, the whole lump will be leavened and corrupted; our previous sinful nature will again have supremacy and overthrow the faith, the holiness upon which we have entered and a good conscience.

Paul does not here speak of leaven in general; he commands to purge out the "old leaven," implying there may be good leaven. Doubtless he is influenced by respect for the words of the Lord Christ where (Mt 13, 33) he likens the kingdom of heaven also to leaven. In this latter case leaven cannot be bad in quality; rather, the object in mixing it with the lump is to produce good, new bread. Reference is to the Word of God, or the preaching of the Gospel, whereby we are incorporated into the kingdom of Christ, or the Christian Church. Though the Gospel appears to be mean, is despicable and objectionable to the world, yet such is its power that wherever introduced it spreads, finding disciples in whom it works; it transforms them, giving to them its own properties, even as leaven imparts its powers to the dough and causes it to rise. But Paul refers here to old, inactive and worthless leaven. He means teachings, views, or manner of life resulting from the Old Adam, from flesh and blood, and destructive of the pure, new doctrine, or a nature renewed by Christianity. Later on he terms it the "leaven of malice and wickedness," and in the verse under consideration bids the Corinthians be a new, pure lump.

Note the apostle's peculiar words. He enjoins purging out the old leaven, assigning as reason the fact: Ye are a new and unleavened lump. By a new unleavened lump he means that faith which clings to Christ and believes in the forgiveness of sin through him; for he immediately speaks of our Passover: Christ, sacrificed for us. By this faith the Corinthians are now purified from the old leaven, the leaven of sin and an evil conscience, and have entered upon the new life; yet they are commanded to purge out the old leaven.

Now, how shall we explain the fact that he bids them purge out the old leaven that they may be a new lump, when at the same time he admits them to be unleavened and a new lump? How can these Corinthians be as true, unleavened wafers, or sweet dough, when they have yet to purge out the old leaven? This is an instance of the Pauline and apostolic way of speaking concerning Christians and the kingdom of Christ; it shows us what the condition really is. It is a discipline wherein a new, Christian life is entered upon through faith in Christ the true Passover; hence, Easter is celebrated with sweet, unleavened bread. But at the same time something of the old life remains, which must be swept out, or purged away. However, this latter is not imputed, because faith and Christ are there, constantly toiling and striving to thoroughly purge out whatever uncleanness remains.

Through faith we have Christ and his purity perfectly conferred upon ourselves, and we are thus regarded pure; yet in our own personal nature we are not immediately made wholly pure, without sin or weakness. Much of the old leaven still remains, but it will be forgiven, not be imputed to us, if only we continue in faith and are occupied with purging out that remaining impurity. This is Christ's thought when he says to his disciples (Jn 15, 3), "Already ye are clean because of the word which I have spoken unto you," and in the same connection he declares that the branches in him must be purged that they may bring forth more fruit. And to Peter-- and to others he says (Jn 13, 10), "He that is bathed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all." These passages, as is also stated elsewhere, teach that a Christian by faith lays hold upon the purity of Christ, for which reason he is also regarded pure and begins to make progress in purity; for faith brings the Holy Spirit, who works in man, enabling him to withstand and to subdue sin.

They are to be censured according to whose representations and views a Christian Church is to be advocated which should be in all respects without infirmity and defect, and who teach that, when perfection is not in evidence, there is no such thing as the Church of Christ nor as true Christians. Many erring spirits, especially strong pretenders to wisdom, and precocious, self-made saints, immediately become impatient at sight of any weakness in Christians who profess the Gospel faith; for their own dreams are of a Church without any imperfections, a thing impossible in this earthly life, even they themselves not being perfect.

Such, we must know, is the nature of Christ's office and dominion in his Church that though he really does instantaneously, through faith, confer upon us his purity, and by the Spirit transforms our hearts, yet the work of transformation and purification is not at once completed. Daily Christ works in us and purges us, to the end that we grow in purity daily. This work he carries on in us through the agency of the Word, admonishing, reproofing, correcting and strengthening; as in the case of the Corinthians through the instrumentality of Paul. Christ also uses crosses and afflictions in effecting this end. He did not come to toil, to suffer and to die because he expected to find pure and holy people. Purity and holiness for us he has acquired in his own person to perfection, inasmuch as he was without sin and perfectly pure from the moment he became man, and this purity and holiness he communicates to us in their flawless perfection in so far our faith clings to him. But to attain personal purity of such perfection requires a daily effort on the part of Christ, until the time shall have come that he has wrought in us a flawless perfection like his own.

So he has given us his Word and his Spirit to aid us in purging out the remaining old leaven, and in holding to our newly-begun purity instead of lapsing from it. We must retain the faith, the Spirit and Christ; and this, as before said, we cannot do if we give place to the old carnal disposition instead of resisting it.

Note, one thing the text teaches: Even the saints have weakness, uncleanness and sin yet to be purged out, but it is not imputed unto them because they are in Christ and occupied in purging out the old leaven.

Another thing, it teaches what constitutes the difference between the saints and the unholy, for both are sinful; it tells the nature of sins despite the presence of which saints and believers are holy, retaining grace and the Holy Spirit, and also what sins are inconsistent with faith and grace.

The sins remaining in saints after conversion are various evil inclinations, lusts and desires natural to man and contrary to the Law of God. The saints, as well as others, are conscious of these sins, but with this difference: they do not permit themselves to be overcome thereby so as to obey the sins, allowing them free course; they do not yield to, but resist, such sins, and, as Paul expresses it here, incessantly purge themselves there from. The sins of the saints, according to him, are the very ones which they purge out.

Those who obey their lusts, however, do not do this, but give rein to the flesh, and sin against the protest of their own consciences. They who resist their sinful lusts retain faith and a good conscience, a thing impossible with those who fail to resist sin and thus violate their conscience and overthrow their faith. If you persist in that which is evil regardless of the voice of conscience, you cannot say, nor believe, that you have God's favor. So then, the Christian necessarily must not yield to sinful lusts.

The Holy Spirit is given for the very purpose of opposing sin and preventing its reign. Paul says (Gal 5, 17): "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh . . . that ye may not do the things that ye would." And again (Rom 8, 13): "If by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live." Also (Rom 6, 12): "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey the lusts thereof:'

"For our passover also hath been sacrificed, even Christ." ["For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us."]

Here Paul assigns his reason for the statement just made--"Ye are unleavened." They are a new, unleavened or sweet lump, not because of any merit on their part, not because of their own holiness or worthiness, but because they have faith in Christ as the Passover sacrificed for them. This sacrifice makes them pure and holy before God. They are no more the old leaven they were when out of Christ. By this sacrifice they are reconciled with God and purified from sin.

Likewise for us God institutes a new ordinance, a new festival. The old has given place to something wholly new. A different and better Passover sacrifice succeeds that of the Jews. The Jews had annually to partake of their offered sacrifice, but they were not thereby made holy nor pure from sin. Theirs was a sign or earnest of the true Passover to come, the Passover promised by God, in the shed blood of which we are washed from sin and wholly healed--a Passover the partaking whereof we must enjoy by faith. We have now one perpetual and eternal Easter festival, wherein faith is nourished, satisfied and gladdened; in other words, we receive remission of sins and comfort and strength through this our Passover, Christ.

The meaning of the phrase "sacrificed for us" has been explained in the sermon on the Passion of Christ. Two thoughts are there presented: First, necessity of considering the greatness and terror of the wrath of God against sin in that it could be appeased and a ransom effected in no other way than through the one sacrifice of the Son of God. Only his death and the shedding of his blood could make satisfaction. And we must consider also that we by our sinfulness had incurred that wrath of God and therefore were responsible for the offering of the Son of God upon the cross and the shedding of his blood. Well may we be terrified because of our sins, for God's wrath cannot be trivial when we are told no sacrifice save alone the Son of God can brave such wrath and avail for sin. Do you imagine yourself able to endure that wrath of God, or to withstand it if you will not consider this and accept it?

The second thought presented in the sermon mentioned is, the necessity of recognizing the inexpressible love and grace of God toward us. Only so can the terrified heart of man regain comfort. It must be made aware why God spared not his own Son but offered him a sacrifice upon the cross, delivered him to death; namely, that his wrath might be lifted from us once more. What greater love and blessing could be shown? The sacrifice of Christ is presented to us to give us sure comfort against the terrors of sin. For we may perceive and be confident that we shall not be lost because of our sins when God makes such a sacrifice the precious pledge to us of his favor and promised salvation. Therefore, though your sins are great and deserve the awful wrath of God, yet the sacrifice represented by the death of the Son of God is infinitely greater. And in this sacrifice God grants you a sure token of his grace and the forgiveness of your sins. But that forgiveness must be apprehended by the faith which holds fast the declaration, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." By this promise must faith be comforted and strengthened.

"Wherefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

Having, then, a Paschal Lamb and a true Easter, let us rightly value them. Let us observe the festival with the gladness it ought to inspire. Let us no longer eat the old leaven, but true wafers and paschal cakes. Where the Paschal Lamb is, there must be the unleavened bread. The former is Christ sacrificed for us. To this sacrifice we can add nothing; we can only receive and enjoy it by faith, recognizing it as a gift to us. However, possessing the Paschal Lamb, it is incumbent upon us to partake also of the sweet festal bread; in other words, while embracing the faith of the Passover, we are to maintain the true doctrine of the Gospel, illustrating it by the godly example of our own lives. We should live an eternal Easter life, as it were, to carry out Paul's analogy, a life wherein we, as justified, sanctified and purified people, continue in peace and the joy of the Holy Spirit, so long as we remain on earth.

In this verse, as in the preceding one, Paul contrasts the leaven and the unleavened bread. He makes leaven a general term for everything which proceeds from flesh and blood and an unrenewed sinful nature, but classifies it under two heads--the leaven of malice and the leaven of wickedness. By "malice" we understand the various open vices and sins which represent manifest wrong to God and our neighbor. "Wickedness" stands for those numerous evil tricks, those nimble, subtle, venomous artifices practiced upon Christian doctrine and the Word of God with intent to corrupt and pervert them, to mislead hearts from the true meaning thereof. Paul warns (2 Cor 11, 3): "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve in his craftiness, your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity that is toward Christ." Under "wickedness" comes also such evils as hypocrisy and other false, deceptive dealing practiced in the name of God by way of adorning and covering the sin, false teaching and deceptive action passed off as right, proper and Christian. Such wickedness Christ terms "the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Mk 8, 15. This sort of leaven, particularly, we have in the world to an unspeakable extent in this last and worst of times.

To the leaven of malice and of wickedness, Paul opposes the leaven of sincerity and truth. To be sincere is to live and act in an upright Christian way, prompted by a faithful, godly heart, a heart kindly disposed to all and meditating wrong and injury to none; and to deal as you would be dealt with. To be true is to refrain from false and crafty dealing, from deceit and roguery, and to teach and live in probity and righteousness according to the pure Word of God. Truth and sincerity must prevail and be in evidence with Christians, who have entered upon a relation and life altogether new; they should celebrate the new Easter festival by bringing faith and doctrine and life into accord with it.