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**A Summary Workbook on  
"The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel"  
by Dr. C.F.W. Walther**

**Point 12**

**The eighth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel is when a preacher leads people to think that God forgives them because of how sorry they are. The real truth is that God forgives people only because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. That is what we trust in; we do not put trust in our own feelings of sorrow.**

It is true that a person must have sorrow in his heart about his sins in order to believe in Jesus and be saved. Jesus showed this when he said "Repent and believe the Gospel." (Mark 1:15) To "repent" here means to be sorry about your sins. Jesus also told his disciples that their preaching should have this same message:

Luke 24:46-47 - "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

Why is it that a person must have repentance before he can believe? According to the words of Jesus, a person must know that he is sick (with sin) before he can be healed by the Savior:

Matthew 9:12-13 - "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

When someone is not hungry and thirsty in his soul, he will have no interest in Jesus and his forgiveness. First he has to know that without Jesus he is only a poor, lost, and condemned sinner.

However, the sorrow in a person's heart is not the reason why God forgives him. If anyone teaches that God forgives because of the sorrow in our hearts, he is mixing up Law and Gospel. Here are the reasons why this is so: 1) Sorrow about sins comes only from the Law, and the Law cannot save us. 2) Sorrow about sin is something that God works in our hearts. It is not something that we do; only God's Law can do it.

A preacher should never tell his people that God will forgive them IF they are sorry enough. That would be making their own sorrow into a good work that is supposed to save them. Instead, he should tell his people "Listen! When you know the guilt of your sin, and how much you need Jesus, then stop looking into your own heart. Instead, look to Jesus and his forgiving grace at the cross!"

Martin Luther wrote that he was overjoyed to finally find out the true meaning of the word "repentance." He had thought before that repentance had to do with his own works. He later found out the truth of Scripture: yes, his sins were terrible, but he could come as he was to Christ for full and free forgiveness of all his sins.

Here is another mistake that a pastor sometimes makes. His church members might admit to being guilty of some particular sin, such as theft or murder. They might also say (in their hearts), "Other than that, I am basically a good person." But it is not enough to admit to being guilty of some particular sin. God does not forgive this man because he is sorry about that one sin. He must first know that he is sinful through and through before the Gospel will have any real meaning for him.

Sometimes a pastor will mislead people by demanding a certain LEVEL of repentance. He might point to this Psalm:

"I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart." (Psalm 38:6-8)

Then he asks his church member "Have you been as sorry as David is here? Have you spent the full day in mourning, feeble and crushed? If not, you must become much MORE sorry before God will forgive you!" This advice is all wrong. Yes, David here describes his own sorrow over sin, but the Bible never says that everyone must have the SAME depth of sorrow. Consider other examples: 1) On Pentecost, the people were frightened about their guilt and said "What shall we do?" (Acts 2) Peter gave the answer of God's grace right away. 2) The jailer of Philippi (Acts 16) was struck by his sins, asking "What must I do to be saved?" Paul did not tell him to struggle, strive, and bring himself to more great agony. No, he told the jailer right away "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!"

When you are preaching and teaching, and you have good reason to know that your listeners consider themselves to be lost sinners, do not delay in preaching the full and sweet Gospel to them.

You should not make the mistake of thinking that repentance is something that only happens when a person is coming to faith for the first time. Because we sin every day, we need to keep bringing our sins to Jesus for forgiveness. David described this in Psalm 51. He calls this repentance a sacrifice that he brings to God, and that God is pleased with this. David was "a man after God's own heart," yet he knew sin still lived in his heart, so he brought his guilt to God every day, and received God's Word of forgiveness every day. We should also say in our hearts, every day, "You are holy, O Lord, but I am a poor sinner. Have mercy on me because of your Son, Jesus Christ." The believer who lives a life of continual repentance will find that God continues to forgive because of Jesus. His heart rests on this Gospel, until the day that God delivers him from this sin-filled life into the glory of heaven.

## QUESTIONS

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1. What does it mean to "repent?" How does a person become repentant?
2. How do we know that the sorrow in our heart is not the reason God forgives us?
3. Where should we look for confidence that God forgives us and loves us?
4. Why is it that, when a person is sorry only for some particular sins, he is not truly repentant?
5. Why is it wrong to demand a certain deep level of sorrow in a person's heart before preaching the Gospel?
6. Why is it important to have daily repentance?
7. What comfort do we have every day when we bring our many sins to the Lord?