

The Law & The Gospel

Martin Luther & Others -- *A Reformation Sampler*

Martin Luther, Sermon On Galatians, 1532

This difference between the Law and the Gospel is the height of knowledge in Christendom. Every person and all persons who assume or glory in the name of Christian should know and be able to state this difference. If this ability is lacking, one cannot tell a Christian from a heathen or a Jew; of such supreme importance is this differentiation. This is why St. Paul so strongly insists on a clean-cut and proper differentiating of these two doctrines.

Martin Luther, (see Luther's Works, Saint Louis edition, 11:81ff)

The law is the Word in which God teaches and tells us what we are to do and not to do, as in the Ten commandments. Now wherever human nature is alone, without the grace of God, the Law cannot be kept, because since Adam's fall in paradise man is corrupt and has nothing but a wicked desire to sin and in his heart cannot be favorably disposed toward the Law, as we know by our own experience. For there is no one who would not rather have no Law at all, and everyone finds and feels within himself that while it is difficult to be pious and do good, it is easy to be wicked and to do evil. And this difficulty or this unwillingness to do what is good prevents us from keeping God's Law; for what is kept with dislike, difficulty, and unwillingness, rates before God as not having been kept at all. And so the Law of God convinces us by our experience that we are naturally wicked, disobedient, lovers of sin, and enemies of God's commandments.

Now from all this one of two things must follow: presumption or despair. Presumption follows when a man sets himself to fulfill the Law with works and diligently sees to it that he does what the letter of the Law asks him to do. He serves God, does not swear, honors father and mother, does not kill, does not commit adultery, and the like. Meanwhile, however, he does not observe his heart, does not note the reason why he is leading such a fine, good life, that he is merely covering the old hypocrite in his heart with such a beautiful life. For if he looked at himself aright, at his own heart, he would discover that he is doing all these things with dislike and out of compulsion; that he fears hell or seeks heaven, if not also far more insignificant matters, namely, honor, goods, health; and that he is motivated by the fear of shame or harm or diseases. In short, he would have to confess that he would rather lead a different life if the

consequence of such a life did not deter him; for he would not do it merely for the sake of the Law. But because he does not see this bad reason, he lives on in security, looks only at the works, not into the heart, and so assumes that he is keeping the Law of God well. The face of Moses is, therefore, covered for him, that is, he does not recognize the meaning of the Law--that it wasn't to be fulfilled with joyful, free, cheerful will. Just so an unchaste person, when asked why he commits the act, can only answer: Because of the pleasure I find in it. For he commits it for the sake of neither reward nor punishment, does not propose to gain anything by it or to escape any evil through it.

Such pleasure the Law would also find in us, so that when you ask a chaste person why he is chaste, he should say: Not for the sake of heaven or hell, not for the sake of honor or shame, but simply because it appears to me to be very fine, and I heartily approve of it even if it were not commanded. See, a heart such as this really loves God's Law and keeps it with pleasure. Such people love God and righteousness, fear and hate nothing but unrighteousness. But no man is thus constituted by nature. The others, however, love the reward and the benefit, fear and hate the punishment and the pain. Therefore they hate God and righteousness, love themselves and unrighteousness; they are hypocrites, shams, deceivers, liars, and boasters. Without grace all men are of this kind, but especially the self-righteous. Hence Scripture says and concludes: "All men are liars" (Ps. 116:11); and again (Ps 39:5; "Every man at his best state is altogether vanity"; and (Ps 14:3) "There is none that does good, no, not one." But despair follows when a man becomes aware of the reason why he is keeping the Law and recognizes that to love God's law is impossible for him, since he finds nothing good in himself but only hatred of the good and lust for the bad. Then he recognizes that works cannot do justice to the Law. Therefore he despairs of works and disregards them. He ought to have love, but he does not find any and of and by himself can have none. The result must be a poor, miserable, humbled spirit, a man oppressed and frightened through the Law by his conscience, which demands and requires of him what he has not a penny to pay. Yet the Law alone is of benefit to such presumptuous people, for it was given to work this knowledge and humiliation. This is its (the Law's) proper work...

The other word of God is not Law or commandment, nor does it require anything of us; but after the first Word, that of the Law, has done this work and distressful misery and poverty have been produced in the heart, God comes and offers his lovely, living Word, and promises, pledges, and obligates himself to give grace and help, that we may get out of this misery and that all sins not only be forgiven but also blotted out and that love and delight to fulfill the law may be given besides. See, this divine promise of his grace and of the forgiveness of his is properly called Gospel. And I say again and yet again that you should never understand Gospel to mean anything but the divine promise of his grace and of the forgiveness of sin. For this is why hitherto St.

Paul's epistles were not understood and cannot be understood by our adversaries even now; they do not know what Law and Gospel really are. For they consider Christ a Legislator and the Gospel nothing but the teaching of new laws. This is nothing else but locking up the gospel and obscuring everything. For "Gospel" is Greek and means "good news," because in it is proclaimed the saving doctrine of life, of the divine promise, and grace and the forgiveness of sins are offered. Therefore works do not belong to the gospel; for it is not laws but faith alone, because it is nothing whatever but the promise and offer of divine grace. He, then, who believes the Gospel receives grace and the Holy Spirit. Thereby the heart becomes glad and joyful in God and then keeps the Law gladly and freely, without the fear of punishment and without the expectation of reward; for it is sated and satisfied with that grace of God by which the law has been satisfied.

John Calvin, The Institutes (2.9.4), 1536

By the term Law, Paul frequently understands that rule of holy living in which God exacts what is his due, giving no hope of life unless we obey in every respect; and, on the other hand, denouncing a curse for the slightest failure. This Paul does when showing that we are freely accepted of God, and accounted righteous by being pardoned, because that obedience of the Law to which the reward is promised is nowhere to be found. Hence he appropriately represents the righteousness of the Law and the Gospel as opposed to each other. But the Gospel has not succeeded the whole Law in such a sense as to introduce a different method of salvation. It rather confirms the Law, and proves that every thing which it promised is fulfilled. What was shadow, it has made substance...

John Bradford, The Places of The Law & Of The Gospel, 1548

Whosoever truly understandeth the division of the places of the Law and of the Gospel, gathered out of the holy scriptures, cannot by any man's doctrine be seduced from the truth, or read the scriptures but to edify both himself and others: whereas he that is ignorant of the same cannot, though he were a great doctor of divinity, and could rehearse every text of the bible without book, but both be deceived, and deceive others; as the experience hereof (the more pity) hath taught, nay, seduced the whole world....Therefore, I say, take to thee the glass of God's law; look therein, and thou shalt see thy just damnation, and God's wrath for sin, which, if thou darest, will drive thee not only to an amendment, but also to a sorrow and hatred of thy wickedness, and even to the brim of despair, out of which nothing can bring thee but the glad tidings of Christ, that is, the gospel: for as God's word doth bind thee, so can nothing but God's word unbind thee; and until thou comest to this point, thou knowest nothing of Christ.

Theodore Beza, The Christian Faith, 1558

We divide this Word into two principal parts or kinds: the one is called the 'Law,' the other the 'Gospel.' For all the rest can be gathered under the one or other of these two headings...Ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity.

The Formula of Concord, 1576

We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction of the Law and of the Gospel, as a most excellently clear light, is to be retained with special diligence in the Church of God, in order that the Word of God, agreeably to the admonition of St. Paul, may be rightly divided.

Ralph Erskine, The Beauties of Erskine, 1745

A Poem On Law & Gospel:

The law supposing I have all, Does ever for perfection call;
The gospel suits my total want, And all the law can seek does grant.

The law could promise life to me, If my obedience perfect be;
But grace does promise life upon My Lord's obedience alone.

The law says, Do, and life you'll win; But grace says, Live, for all is done;
The former cannot ease my grief, The latter yields me full relief.

The law will not abate a mite, The gospel all the sum will quit;
There God in thret'nings is array'd But here in promises display'd.

The law excludes not boasting vain, But rather feeds it to my bane;
But gospel grace allows no boasts, Save in the King, the Lord of Hosts.

The law brings terror to molest, The gospel gives the weary rest;
The one does flags of death display, The other shows the living way.

The law's a house of bondage sore, The gospel opens prison doors;
The first me hamer'd in its net, The last at freedom kindly set.

An angry God the law reveal'd The gospel shows him reconciled;
By that I know he was displeas'd, By this I see his wrath appeas'd.

The law still shows a fiery face, The gospel shows a throne of grace;
There justice rides alone in state, But here she takes the mercy-seat.

Lo! in the law Jehovah dwells, But Jesus is conceal'd;
Whereas the gospel's nothing else But Jesus Christ reveal'd.

C.H. Spurgeon, New Park Street Pulpit, 1855

There is no point on which men make greater mistakes than on the relation which exists between the law and the gospel. Some men put the law instead of the gospel; others put gospel instead of the law. A certain class maintains that the law and the gospel are mixed...These men understand not the truth and are false teachers.

C.F.W. Walther, Law & Gospel, 1884

The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording a correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book....The Word of God is not rightly divided when the law is not preached in its full sternness, and the gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, gospel elements are mingled with the law and law elements with the gospel.

J. Gresham Machen, What Is Faith?, 1925

A new and more powerful proclamation of law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour; men would have little difficulty with the gospel if they had only learned the lesson of the law. As it is, they are turning aside from the Christian pathway; they are turning to the village of Morality, and to the house of Mr. Legality, who is reported to be very skillful in relieving men of their burdens... 'Making Christ Master' in the life, putting into practice 'the principles of Christ' by one's own efforts-these are merely new ways of earning salvation by one's obedience to God's commands.

J. T. Mueller, Christian Dogmatics, 1955

This distinction between the Law and the Gospel, which is so clearly taught in Holy Scripture, the Christian must conscientiously observe and neither weaken the

condemning force of the Law nor diminish the saving comfort of the Gospel. Unless the Law and the Gospel are thus preached...the Christian religion is deprived of its distinct content, is paganized by the introduction of work-righteousness as a cause of salvation, and is therefore rendered incapable of saving sinners.

John Calvin, Select Prayers, 15??

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast made known thy law, and hast also added thy gospel, in which thou callest us to thy service, and also invitest us with all kindness to partake of thy grace; O grant, that we may not be deaf, either to thy command or to the promises of thy mercy, but render ourselves submissive to thee everywhere, and so learn to devote all our faculties to thee, that we may in truth avow that the rule of a holy and religious life, has been delivered to us in thy law, and that we may firmly adhere to thy promises, lest through any of the allurements of the world, or through the flatteries and delusions of Satan, thou shouldst suffer our minds to be drawn away from that love which thou hast once for all manifested to us in thine only begotten Son, and in which thou daily confirmest us by the teaching of the gospel, until we at length shall come to the full enjoyment of this love in that celestial inheritance, which has been purchased for us by the blood of thine only Son. Amen.

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