

Law and Gospel: One More Time

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Law and Gospel: this is the classic Lutheran approach to preaching the Word and interpreting the Scriptures, since all the way back to the 16th century when all of our Lutheran Confessional writings were penned and approved. **Law and Gospel:** the Law kills, while the Gospel gives new life; the Law judges and condemns, while the Gospel redeems with mercy; the Law accuses, the Gospel comforts; the Law exposes our short comings, our selfishness, and sin, while the Gospel covers our sins with God's love. The Gospel covers our selfishness with Christ's self sacrifice. The Gospel covers the history of hurt that is our legacy with the grace of God that soothes our wounds, forgives our sin, and saves us from selfishness and death. **Law and Gospel:** that's what has defined Lutheranism through the centuries, and that is what addresses us through our texts today.

Law, law, and more law: that is what our First Lesson, our Second Lesson, and the Gospel Lesson lift up and proclaim. In the First Lesson from Deuteronomy, we are told that God's Law is good. That Law lays out what God desires. It tells us what to do. The Law guides the generations in the way of God's salvation. "For what other great nation has statues and ordinances that are like the laws and commandments God has given us?" (Deuteronomy 4:7) The Law is a sign of blessing, telling us both how to love and what we should teach our children. The Book of James seems to be in perfect agreement with these sentiments, which is why Luther warned against trusting James too uncritically. James encourages us to look upon the Law, listen to the Law, the perfect law of liberty, and then, just do it. Persevere. "Be ye not hearers of the word only, but doers of the law" (James 1:22); and you will be blessed by your doings.

Luther suspected that James didn't know about the burden of the Law, and that James simply didn't fully appreciate the power of the Law to accuse, to expose, to judge, and to kill. According to Luther, if we're looking for salvation, we don't need more Law, however perfect; what we need is more grace, precisely because we are imperfect. We are sinners, whose sinning has invited God's judgment to condemn us as guilty, destined to die, and unable to do anything about it. That is exactly what we say in the *Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness*: "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." A little more willpower won't do it. A little less selfishness and a few more good works: these cannot erase the history of sin and the legacy of selfishness that make up our lives.

This is old ground already covered. What is worrisome is that when we look at the Gospel of Mark, it looks like even Jesus might not understand the crucial insights we've attributed to him. Well, that may be not quite right, since these controversy stories in the Gospel of Mark have the primary purpose of explaining what it is about God's people's focus on the Law that is killing them. In this case, the elders, scribes, and Pharisees are

using God's Law to avoid a relationship with God. They are so focused on the Law that they wouldn't recognize God, even if He were standing right in front of them, and, of course, He is, in the person of Jesus. More precisely, their religious focus is on ways to apply and obey the Law that limit its intent to peripherals in life. That's what Isaiah meant when he wrote, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (Mark 7:6-7) That's what Jesus confirmed when he added, "You abandon the commandments of God and hold fast to the traditions of men." (Mark 7:8) Unfortunately, that is the problem with the Law generally. We get so focused on the Law – how to read it, what it means, where its loop-holes are, and how to manipulate it – that we lose sight of the God who gave it and its true intent, which is not to make us clever legalists but lovers of God, to become a people who know how much God loves us and want to respond by returning God's love with our own.

Our texts this morning seem to have as their common thread the call to do the right thing and live the right way. "Give heed to the statutes and ordinances" and "observe them diligently." (Deuteronomy 4:1a, 6a) This First Lesson implies lots of details, and the Second Lesson offers lists of advice: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Rid yourselves of sordidness and rank growth of wickedness...." (James 1:19, 21) In the Gospel, Jesus continues with a list of what that *rank growth of wickedness* might look like: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." (Mark 7:21-22) It is easy to take away from this the sense that it's all about what we do. That's the essence of true religion. That's the truth of religion, namely, doing the right thing, living the right way. But that is not really what the Gospel is about, and that is not what today's Gospel is about. There's more to this list than a haphazard assembling of various behaviors that are in some way unhealthy, immoral, and illegal. That is not Jesus' focus. For the text begins with a controversy about ritualistic cleansing – washing hands, cups, pots and kettles. Hygiene isn't the point. The point is holiness. In fact, holiness is ultimately the point of all the laws.

The sacred texts we remember, the history we share, stories about God's involvement in our lives, God's call, God's word, God's will, God's ways: these connect us with God. They make us God's people. "You who once were no people are now God's people." That's what Peter says in 1 Peter 2:10. Through God's actions we became a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. So, get your minds out of the soap suds. It's not about washed or unwashed. It's not about pots and pans. It's about our being God's people. God has taken the initiative to break through our indifference, to overcome the barriers of our selfishness, to fight through layer upon layer of distractions to get through to us. That is what all these texts are about. God didn't undertake the effort to reveal His love and make us His own so that we could return to the blindness that comes with focusing primarily on ourselves, which, unfortunately, is precisely what the Law encourages when it leads us to focus on how we're doing, how we're measuring up. Focusing on ourselves is not going to get us closer to God. The truth is that Jesus and his followers will give up these ancient traditions of ritualistic washing, precisely because true religion is not about following the laws, but loving the Lord.

There is no doubt that we could analyze each of the behaviors included on Jesus' list, and separate them according to which are immoral, illegal, unhealthy, ill-advised, and the like; but if we are not moved by God's grace and touched by God's love, these exercises will miss the point. The purpose of God's Law, whether we are talking about the ordinances or ritualistic cleansing, commandments about dieting restrictions, universal moral codes, or meticulous systems of social order, the purpose of God's Law is to reveal God's love, to embrace us with God's love, and to empower us with God's love. This love makes us God's people, and this is the crucial point. It's not about the laws, whether there are ten of them as in the Ten Commandments brought down from the mountain by Moses, or three of them proclaimed by Micah to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly, or the two summarized by Jesus, namely, to love God with all we are and our neighbor as ourselves; for it all boils down to the one that Augustine landed on: love, then do as you please.

In other words, get the focus off yourself and on your neighbor. This will come as we learn to look to God, to rely on Christ, and to allow the Spirit to live within us and among us so that God's love can flow through us freely, unhindered by the barriers we've built, the boundaries we've determined, the protections we've constructed, the limitations we've set, the selfishness that defines us, and blinds us to the love with which God loves us, the grace with which God embraces us, and the compassion with which God sends us. These are the concerns that are on Jesus' mind in the Gospel of Mark. These are the concerns that were on Luther's mind in taking up the Book of James. I would say it this way: the perfect law of liberty is the wide embrace of God's grace. That's the purpose behind God's giving the Law through Moses, namely, to make us holy in the sense that we are set apart for service, which finds full expression through our learning to live the love God gives ... in Jesus' name. Amen

An End-of-the-Summer Party

**SUNDAY AFTERNOON, LABOR DAY WEEKEND,
SEPTEMBER 6TH**

12:00 p.m.	Let the Fun Begin!
1:00 p.m.	Let the Food Begin!
2:00 p.m.	Let the Music Begin!
4:00 p.m.	Let the Clean-up Begin!

**HELP US RAISE MONEY FOR THE FOOD
PANTRY!**