

Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel

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October 29, 2016 – Redeemer Lutheran Church, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia

November 4, 2016 – St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Tanunda, South Australia, Australia

Slide 1 **Law & Gospel - *Seelsorge***

- *Seelsorge* – German for “care of souls”
- Pastor is *Seelsorger*, physician of souls
- Pastor has a calling akin to that of a medical doctor – diagnosis & prescription
- Best practice for medical doctors is to listen to the patient to properly diagnose and prescribe a cure. So also, pastoral practice calls for the pastor to listen to parishioner that diagnosis and prescription might be had.
- The Church is a hospital for those who are dying. The Church is full of those who are sick with sin. That is why we gather in the Church for Divine Service – because we need what Christ delivers. We need the Gospel.
- This prescription and diagnosis is also given to be enjoyed within the Christian life. As you live out your various callings (spouse, parent, child, friend, co-worker, fellow Christian, etc.) you are called to listen to another that you might deliver Christ to that person.

Slide 2 **Diagnosis: The Law and Its Functions/Uses**

- As we have been blessed to learn from Pastor Baikovs, the Law is God's good gift to us. It is holy and righteous; it is even God's good design for His human creatures.
- And it is the means of diagnosis within the “care of souls.”
- Quick review of the three functions/uses of the Law.
 - Uses vs. functions – It is common for Lutherans to speak of the three *uses* of the Law. A challenge with such terminology is that it leaves some with the impression that the Law can be controlled by the one who wields it. The Lord does with the Law what He does with the Law. I may rightly use it with the goal of restraining evil, convicting someone that he might repent, or instructing my congregation in how to live the Christian life. But my intended use may not be how they hear the Law. That is not a reason to avoid using the Law with a particular end in mind, but it is a precaution that my intended use may not be how the Law functions on a given occasion.
 - First function/use – Curb – Restrains evil that all humans might be kept on the proper path of life.
 - Second function/use – Mirror – so-called theological use of the Law – As I look in the mirror of the Law, I see my sin; I see that I cannot undo my sin; I see that I am justly condemned; I see that I need the Savior. Thus, I am prepared for the hearing of the Gospel.
 - Third function/use – Guide – Having been set free from sin's condemnation by the Gospel, I desire to live in accord with God's good design. Thus, the Law remains as a guide for the Christian life.
- *Lex semper accusat.* “The Law always accuses.” Though the Law does more than accuse, even when one seeks to use the Law as curb or guide the accusation of the Law cannot be restrained.

- Diagnosis – In the “care of souls,” the Law diagnoses our disease. We suffer from a fatal disease. We are sinners. That is our identity and we are unable to change it. Sin brings death (Rom. 6:23). While the central issue is our nature as sinners, the Law also diagnoses the specific sin that afflicts us a given time.

Slide 3 Prescription – The Gospel

- Having been diagnosed by the Law, we need a prescription. The only cure for our fatal disease is the Gospel.
- Christ has blessed us through Pastor Lockwood with a clear definition of what the Gospel is and what it isn't (refer back to his presentation for the latter). It is the unmerited favor of God (grace alone) received by faith alone apart from works, all for the sake of Christ alone. Christ's perfect keeping of the Law on our behalf, His taking of our sin upon Himself at the cross, His giving of His righteousness to us, His work on our behalf in the Word, in Baptism, in Absolution, in the Supper.
- “Medicine of Immortality” is language from the early Church for the Lord's Supper. Just as the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 11) teaches us that the unworthy reception of the Supper can lead to sickness and “falling asleep” (biblical language for physical death), so the worthy reception of the Supper brings life. When a penitent Christian receives the Supper, trusting that Christ's body and blood are given for the forgiveness of sin, it brings life immortal. It is the medicine of immortality. The Gospel is such medicine however it is received.

Slide 4 Law & Gospel in Comparison

- Law and Gospel stand in dynamic union. They are not in tension; they are not balanced against each other. They have cohesion so that they go hand in hand.
- The dynamic union of Law and Gospel is seen in comparison of the two.
 - The Law shows our sin; the Gospel shows our Savior.
 - The Law places demands upon me; the Gospel delivers God's promises to me.
 - The Law condemns me for my sin; the Gospel forgives me of my sin.
 - The Law kills me; the Gospel resurrects me.
- Because Law and Gospel are in dynamic union, what you do with one affects the other. For example, cheap law cheapens the Gospel.
 - Cheap law looks nice because I believe I can fulfill it.
 - Cheap law runs with man-made commands that are doable. Cheap law pats me on the back and says that I'm doing great and that God must be pleased with me because I give a certain percentage of income to my congregation, because I don't drink, because I don't play cards, because I don't dance, and so it goes. You have your own piece of cheap law to which you cling.
 - Cheap law ignores the full severity of God's Law. His Law says that if I hate my brother I stand condemned. His Law says that if I look with lust upon a woman, I am guilty of adultery. His Law says that we are all sinners because even when we control our actions, even if we can bridle the tongue, even then sin pours forth from our hearts.
 - When cheap law is heard rather than God's Law, then I do not see my need for the Gospel, my need for Christ to die and rise for me. I do all those things of the

cheap law, so I'm just fine... until God's Law breaks through to open my eyes to reality.

- Because God's Law condemns us so clearly, sinners seek other ways to dodge its condemnation. One way is to say that Christ has freed us from the Law. Yet Christ says just the opposite. Christ says that He came to fulfill the Law, not to overthrow it.
 - Christ fulfilled the Sabbath. The seventh day was given for rest. Christ brings that rest into His very self by His seventh-day rest in the tomb. Now our rest is found in Christ. In Him we have rest of sin's condemnation.
 - Christ fulfilled the dietary laws. Scripture teaches that the dietary laws are a matter of cleanliness. Christ brings all that cleanliness into Himself as He not only fulfilled the dietary laws, but also as our cleanliness is found in Him. You are clean because you are in Christ.
 - Christ pulled all the demands of the Law into Himself. He did not harm His neighbor in his body, but helped and befriended us in our bodily need, so that He dies for our salvation. That is not reason for us to disregard our neighbor's need, but reason to help our neighbor.
 - In other words, God's good order for His creation remains in place. The created order of Genesis 1-2 remains in place (marriage, relationship between man and woman, etc.). The created order of loving God above all else and loving my neighbor as myself remains in place.

Slide 5 Justification & Sanctification

- Yet another aspect of the proper distinction of Law and Gospel is the relationship between justification and sanctification.
- Justification is all about my vertical relationship with God. I am right with God for one reason – Christ! For Christ's sake, I am pleasing to the Father.
- Sanctification flows out from justification. Because I am right with the Father by the merit of Christ, I seek to live in love toward my neighbor. There is the horizontal relationship. Notice the key is that my loving actions toward my neighbor result from justification. My loving actions in no way contribute to justification.
- Yet sinners seek to justify themselves by their actions all the time. The definitive Lutheran handling of the relationship and distinction between justification and sanctification is Adolph Köberle's *The Quest for Holiness*. Its original German title is *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung* (Justification & Sanctification).
- Köberle points out that all of our attempts to justify ourselves can be boiled down three means.
 - Pietism – perfect one's will – This is the way of legalism. If I can control my will to do the right things and not do the wrong things, then I will be pleasing to God and my fellow man. That is the false promise of pietism.
 - Mysticism – perfect one's experience – If I can create the right experience where I feel peace or ecstasy or whatever, then I can be sure that I have had a true encounter with the divine. That is the false promise of mysticism.
 - Rationalism – perfect one's mind – If I can focus my mind properly so that I think rightly, then I will have true insight into all things, unbounded by man's shortcomings. That is the unattainable, false promise of rationalism.

- These three are quite distinct, yet there is one thing that holds them all together – focus on the self. It’s all about me! This is “navel-gazing.” It’s cute when a little baby does it. It is deadly when we do it. It kills faith because it leaves us with no certainty. Have I perfected my will enough? Have I created the right experiences and have they lasted long enough? Have I refined my mind enough? Honesty always leads to the answer no.
- Self-justification robs us of certainty. The Spirit gives us certainty by calling us to faith in Christ. I am certain that I stand before the Father holy and blameless; I am certain because of Christ.

Slide 6 Faith is Focused *Extra Nos*

- This is why faith is always focused *extra nos* – “outside us.”
- Beware those who tell you, “You’ve just got to have faith.” Or have you caught yourself saying, “If only I had more faith...”? But that is not what faith does. Faith is not navel-gazing. Faith looks outside us.
- For justification, faith looks outside us to Christ. So the question is not whether I have enough faith or if my faith is strong enough. The question is whether I have a Savior. Is Christ enough of a Savior to handle my sin? Is Christ strong enough to save one like me? Most certainly yes! When you are having a crisis of faith, don’t focus on faith. Look to your Savior.
- When it comes to sanctification, faith looks outside us to the neighbor. What is my neighbor’s need? Doing good works is not about what makes me feel good at the end of the day. Sure, you can spend the day caring for somebody else and feel good about it. That is fine. But that is not the goal. Sanctification looks for what my neighbor needs, not the good feeling I desire.

Slide 7 Sanctification Flows from Justification

- Another way to get at it is to ask “Who needs my good works?” God does not need them; He takes fine care of Himself. I do not need them for salvation; Christ’s work has done that. Who’s left? My neighbor. That is where good works are directed.
- Though my neighbor receives my good works, they are a means for me show gratitude to God for His goodness and salvation. Good works are a grateful response.
- Not only do good works serve my neighbor, but they are evidence to my neighbor of faith in Christ. Paul Speratus captures this in his delightful hymn *Salvation Unto Us Has Come*. Therein we sing “works serve our neighbor and supply the proof that faith is living.”
- Or think to your catechesis. If you were catechized in a Lutheran congregation as a youth, you likely learned Ephesians 2:8, 9 by heart. You learned it by heart for good reason as it wonderfully captures that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, all as a free gift of God. But St. Paul did not stop there. He continued with verse ten where that free gift of salvation leads into good works that you were created to do.
- The liturgy is faithfully formed by Scripture and so it also teaches us of our vertical relationship with God (clinging to Him by faith) and our horizontal relationship with our neighbor (serving in love). That is you get in the Post-Communion Collect: We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through **this salutary gift**, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same **in faith toward You** and **in fervent love toward one another**; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our

Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

- When it comes to the good works of a sanctified life, both Law and Gospel are needed. The Law informs me what good works are. The Gospel motivates and enables me to do those good works.
- One last comment on good works: good works are necessary. That is what we confess in the Book of Concord. Good works are NOT necessary for salvation; that is all on Christ. Nevertheless, good works are necessary as I live out the Christian life in love for my neighbor.

Slide 8 Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther

- Having set the stage, let's give attention to how to properly distinguish Law & Gospel. To that end, we will learn from C.F.W. Walther.
- 1839 – Walther came as a young pastor as part of the Saxon immigration to United States. Through a series of events, he would quickly become a leader of those immigrants and others. He would be the first president of what you and I know as the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He would be the first president of Concordia Seminary which is now located in suburban St. Louis. He would be Synod president, seminary president, seminary lecturer, and pastor of a three-congregation parish at one time.
- With all that Christ accomplished through Walther, arguably his greatest contribution is a series of Friday evening lectures delivered in 1884-1885. The lectures were delivered to seminary students on the proper distinction of Law & Gospel (there's a rowdy Friday evening for you).

Slide 9 The Proper Distinction of Law & Gospel

- The lectures were captured by the seminary students through their copious notes. Their notes were compiled and made into a book. The original edition was in German since that was the language of the seminary in the late 19th century.
- It has now been translated into English numerous times. Various editions are available. For those who are not familiar with this work and its setting/background, the reader's edition published by Concordia Publishing House is invaluable. It gives great insight for a fuller understanding.

Slide 10 Initial Four Overarching Theses

- Walther begins with four overarching theses.
- Thesis I – Scripture is made of two chief doctrines – Law and Gospel – which differ from each other fundamentally.
- Thesis II – If you wish to be an orthodox teacher (one who teaches rightly) then you must not only present all doctrines of Scripture, but you must also rightly distinguish Law and Gospel.
- Thesis III – Rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel is the highest and most difficult art – especially for theologians (pastors). It is only taught by the Holy Spirit and experience.
 - Paraphrase of Luther – “Count no man a true theologian until he has spent 100 years as a pastor in Christ's Church.”

- Thesis IV – Rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel not only gives great insight into Scripture, without it Scripture remains a sealed book.
 - Thus, the critical importance of rightly distinguishing Law & Gospel.

Slide 11 **Twenty-One Theses Regarding How Law & Gospel Are Confused**

- Having offered the initial four theses, Walther builds upon those four with twenty-one additional theses regarding how Law and Gospel are confused.
- Thesis VIII – You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel if... you preach the Law to those in terror because of sin or if you preach the Gospel to those who are secure in their sin.
 - Those in terror of their sin need... the Gospel to grant them peace!
 - Those secure in their sin need... the Law to drive them to repentance!
 - When have you gotten this backwards? Why? Want to put someone in their place? That is not Christ's way. He is all about forgiveness.
- Thesis IX – You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel if... you point sinners who have been struck down by the Law to their own prayers and struggles with God. Point them to the Word and Sacraments.
 - Remember, where does faith focus? *Extra nos*. When you are crushed by the Law's condemnation, navel-gazing won't give you peace, but will give you more terror as you see more and more sin within you. Look outside yourself. Look to Christ. Look to what He has done for you in your Baptism; listen to His word of absolution; hear the Gospel.
 - Why look outside yourself? Because Christ works in the way of certainty. He won't leave you in doubt. You can be certain that He has forgiven you when He is willing to put His own body and blood into your mouth.
- Thesis XIII – You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel if... you explain faith as if people can make themselves believe. Instead, preach faith into the heart by laying the Gospel promises before them.
 - Again, no navel-gazing! You cannot conjure up faith.
 - Small Catechism, 3rd Article of Creed, *What does this mean?* I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but **the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...**
 - The answer to wavering faith is not to look at faith. The answer is receive Christ through the Gospel. That is why Christ gives the Word and Sacraments.
- Thesis XXIII – You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel if... you use the Law to urge the unregenerate to good works and thus become godly and if you use the Law instead of the Gospel to urge the regenerate to do good.
 - Doing good works will not make the unregenerate godly. Godliness is given by Christ in the Gospel, received by faith.
 - The regenerate, those with faith, do good works by the motivation of the Gospel, not the Law.
- Thesis XXV – You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel if... you do not allow the Gospel to predominate.
 - This is more than just counting the number of words or sentences given to the Gospel in a sermon.
 - The Gospel is to be given the loudest and last say.

Slide 12 Reading the Text and the Person

- The first and lesser challenge in rightly distinguishing the Law and Gospel is reading the text. The particular passage of Scripture is examined for how the Law is being proclaimed in the text and how the Gospel is being proclaimed.
- The second and greater challenge in rightly distinguishing the Law and Gospel is reading the person. Does this person need to hear the Law or the Gospel?
 - A young lady comes to my study and asks, “What does God say about abortion?” I reply, “God says, ‘You shall not murder.’ Abortion is murder. It is sin.” What I have said is true, but I know that I have said the wrong thing to her when she replies, “That is what I thought. And that is why I know that God must hate me. I had an abortion and it has haunted me ever since. God hates people like me.”
 - She has already been crushed by the Law. She does not need to hear more Law. She needs the Gospel.
 - Before giving an answer, simply asking, “Why do you ask?” allows opportunity to gauge whether the Law or the Gospel is needed.

Slide 13 Leviticus 19:2/1 Peter 1:16

- Let’s put this into practice with Leviticus 19:2 which is then quoted in 1 Peter 1:16. As you read the text, is this Law or Gospel? Yes!
 - It can be translated as a policy command – be holy because I the LORD your God am holy. This is the Law, calling you to live holy.
 - It can also be translated as an indicative statement of fact – you will be holy because I the Lord your God am holy. This is the Gospel proclaiming that your holiness is based upon the One to whom you belong.
- Next, read the person, even read yourself. When do I need to hear a policy command (Law)? When I have not been living a holy life and I need to be called to repentance.
- When do I need to hear an indicative statement of fact? When I have been crushed by the Law and bemoan my unholy life. Then, Christ speaks clearly that I am holy because I belong to Him.
- The same dynamic is found in the First Commandment. It can be translated as a policy command – You shall have no other gods before Me. It can also be translated as an indicative statement of fact – You will have no other gods before Me. Why? Because Christ is your God and He will not cease caring for you.
- So, which is it? Policy command or indicative statement of fact?
 - Why do you ask?

Slide 14 How Then Shall I Preach/Listen to a Sermon?

- Both the preacher and the listener asks, “How are the demands of the Law placed upon me in this text? How are the blessings of the Gospel delivered to me in this text?”
- To avoid generalities, the pastor allows the text to speak specifically to him about the Law’s demands upon him and the Gospel’s deliverance for him. Then, he can proclaim those specifically to the listeners. Listeners should be equally specific in hearing the Law and Gospel for themselves.

- The Law is comfortable for us when it is directed at others – “Go get ‘em, Pastor!” But the Law is properly proclaimed when it is pointing out my sin and yours rather than somebody else’s sin.
- Even more, the Gospel is properly proclaimed when it points me specifically to Christ for full confidence and certainty in salvation.

Slide 15 How Then Shall I Deliver Pastoral/Christian Care?

- The same holds true for pastoral care and for your own Christian care of family and friends.
- An example from Scripture – Paul and the Corinthians
 - 1 Corinthians 5 & 6 – in dealing with sexual immorality in the Church where there was no repentance, Paul speaks the Law. He not only calls the Corinthians to account, he also calls upon them to excommunicate the sinner. Such church discipline is about proclaiming the Law that repentance might be had and forgiveness (Gospel) be given. Notice that Christ bookends His teaching regarding church discipline in Matthew 18 with parables about forgiveness.
 - 2 Corinthians 2 – while we cannot be certain this is the same person that Paul said should be excommunicated in 1 Corinthians, the congregation has one who was excommunicated, but has come to repentance. Now that the Law has done its work, Paul says that the brother is to be restored. Sin is forgiven; it is not held over the brother’s head.
- Another example from Church history – following the “Here I stand” moment at the Diet of Worms, Luther is kidnapped by German princes who wish to protect him. He is locked away in the Wartburg castle for a year. He spends that time translating the New Testament into German. When he returns to Wittenberg, he finds a mess. The Gospel was abused to give occasion for libertinism. So Luther preaches the Law to call them to repentance.

Slide 16 Two Present-Day Examples

- First matter for discussion: bioethics
 - What does God’s Law say?
 - What does God’s Gospel say?
 - Palliative care is being given to your mother because there is no medical hope for a cure. Morphine is being administered. As doses are increased, you wonder whether it has passed from palliative care to hastening death. God’s Law says that we are not hasten death.
 - Months after Mom’s death, you begin to question whether you were guilty of hastening her death. Now the Gospel comes to say that you are forgiven and to grant you confidence that she was and still remains in His grace. You are in His gracious hand as well, removing the guilt of whatever choices you regret.
- Second matter for discussion: Marriage counseling
 - What does God’s Law say?
 - What does God’s Gospel say?
 - Where is there a need for repentance?
 - Where is there a need for forgiveness?
 - What is God calling you to do for your spouse?

- What forgiveness is God delivering to you and your spouse through each other?

Slide 17 Theodosius & Ambrose (AD 390)

- Theodosius was Roman Emperor and a Christian. He sinfully ordered the killing of thousands in Thessalonica. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, called him to the repentance, even upon pains of excommunication. In time, Ambrose's preaching of the Law took hold. Theodosius repented and then Ambrose spoke forgiveness. This was a seminal moment in which the Church taught the world that no one is above the Law. Even more, here we see the highest and most difficult Christian art – the proper distinction of Law and Gospel – in action, bringing about what Christ desires – forgiveness.