

Law/Gospel Distinctions
Reformation Sunday
October 27, 2019
Romans 3:19-28

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus:

In our confirmation classes, we teach that there are two great doctrines, or teachings, in the Bible -- the Law and the Gospel. Although the Bible contains many doctrines, these two, the Law and the Gospel, are the basic framework for understanding any teaching of Scripture. Whenever we read a portion of the Bible we should ask ourselves whether the selection is primarily Law or primarily Gospel. The more clearly we understand the difference between the Law and the Gospel, the more clearly we can see the boundless grace of God in Jesus Christ for lost sinners.

In the days before the Reformation the distinction between Law and Gospel was not clear at all. The Law was viewed as our "helper" in getting right with God. It was taught that the better you kept the Law, the more acceptable you were to God. The Gospel was seen as simply a little "boost" we needed to help us get going on the road to our salvation. This blurring of the distinction between the Law and Gospel gave rise to many abuses in the Church. The sale of Indulgences whereby people thought that they could purchase forgiveness of sins and receive the assurance of salvation for their deceased relatives, was the spark that ignited the great movement to reform the church and return it to its solid foundation of Salvation by Grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ.

The church today must continue to make a clear distinction between the Law and the Gospel. If we can save ourselves by our own works or merits, then the great work of Jesus Christ becomes unnecessary and the Savior died in vain. So, this morning as we observe the festival of the Reformation, let us turn to our text, St. Paul's letter to the Romans, where the difference between the Law and the Gospel is seen most clearly.

In his letter to the Romans Paul begins by making it very clear that no one is acceptable to God on his or her own merits. He starts with the Gentiles. They did not have the revealed Law of God. It hadn't been given to them. But that's no excuse, says Paul. Ignorance of the commandments is no excuse. You may have thought that the speed limit was 80, when in fact it was only 50. But you will still have to pay the speeding ticket. So it is with God's moral Law. Ignorance of the commandments is no excuse. God still holds people accountable for their disobedience. In fact, Paul says, God's wrath goes out against the "godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth". He goes on to say: "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law." Gentiles who sin will perish even though they didn't have God's revealed law. God still holds them accountable.

The Jews, on the other hand, had been given the law of God. His holy will had been revealed to them by Moses on Mt. Sinai. Weren't they better off than the Gentiles simply because they had the Law? Not at all, says Paul, for knowing the law, while failing to abide by it also results in condemnation. You may be well aware that the speed limit is 50, but that knowledge of the law will be of no use to you if you are caught doing 80. In fact, your guilt will be even greater because you KNEW what the law demanded, but deliberately disobeyed it anyway. That's why St. Paul, speaking to the Jews, says: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." The Jews are no better off than the Gentiles when it comes to pleasing God. In fact, possessing the law, but failing to abide by it makes the condemnation even greater.

"Therefore", Paul concludes, "no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." You may be considered a righteous person in the sight of other people by being a law-abiding citizen. They look upon your deeds and pronounce you a good person. But God looks upon the heart, the motive. Here we can see the two-fold function of the law. One function of the law is to restrain sin and thus promote civil righteousness. Without laws society would be in anarchy. So, the law serves a major purpose in restraining the lawless, in curbing our sinful ways. It doesn't take away the sinful will, but it does function to restrain our coarse outbursts of sin. Now this function of the law may make us look good in the sight of our neighbors when we outwardly obey the laws. But God sees things differently. He knows our real motives. He knows how often we only obey the law out of fear lest we be caught, or out of the hope of some reward or accolade from others. He also knows that left on our own, without the law, we would quickly do only what pleases ourselves. In His sight obeying the Law will never make us righteous.

In our text Paul says the same thing: "No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." Here we see the Proper function of the Law. The Law was not given so that we could, by keeping it, become righteous before God. It was given for the primary purpose of showing us our Sins. The Law is God's mirror to show us not how wonderful we are, but to reveal our true inner motives, the depth of our fallen nature -- to accuse us and convince us of the reality of God's anger and condemnation. The proper function of the law is not to produce love for God in our hearts, but to produce fear of His anger over our disobedience.

CFW Walther, one of the fathers of the Lutheran Church in North America, wrote about this proper function of the law: "One who does not know the Law is at ease regarding his sins. But when the Law is powerfully proclaimed and it strikes that person's conscience like lightning, he will not get better, but worse. He will begin to rebel against God. 'What I am to be eternally damned? I know I am God's enemy, but I can't help it.' This is the effect of the Law. It drives a person to despair. But good for the person who has come that far! He has taken a long step on the way to his salvation." Walther saw that the Law of God offers us no hope of life. No hope of salvation. Only condemnation. Our own efforts and merits to become righteous in God's sight are doomed.

"BUT NOW", declares St. Paul in our text. But NOW something NEW! "But NOW a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known." But now God has made known a way for us to be righteous before Him that is apart from the demands of the Law. The Law could only drive us to despair so that we could see how desperately we need God's mercy and intervention.

And now God HAS INDEED intervened. No longer are we in the dark. His righteousness has been revealed. It has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Verse 25 of our text tells how it happened: "God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement." A sacrifice of atonement. After countless centuries of people offering countless sacrifices to appease God for their sins and attempting to become right in His sight, now God has offered up the only Sacrifice for sin that would ever be able to do the job. The Sacrifice of His own Son that pays the price that was required to reconcile us to God.

That's what atonement means -- being at one with God. Being reconciled to Him. Apart from Christ we are separated from God by our sin and disobedience. Apart from Christ we are objects of God's wrath. but now His wrath has finally been appeased by the only Sacrifice that would ever work -- the righteous life of His Son, given in complete love for lost sinners. "We have all sinned," our text says, "and fall short of the glory of God, but we are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Our justification is by Grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

What Good News this is for lost sinners who can never hope to keep the demands of the Law! Righteousness in God's sight does not depend on my good works. It does not depend on how good of a person I am or how well I do in comparison to others. I am righteous in God's sight because Jesus Christ was righteous for me. The Law condemned me, but the good news, the Gospel, set me free from condemnation. Now God loves me dearly, grants me salvation.

Today the distinction between Law and Gospel is again very blurry. When it is not very clear that the Law condemns us then the Gospel fails to be the great comfort and rescue and deliverance that it should be. If we can in any way save ourselves or be right in God's sight by doing our best or by "being as good as anyone else", then Jesus went to the cross in vain. Let's appreciate for ourselves this sharp distinction between Law and Gospel. Let's treasure it ourselves and speak of it clearly to others. Christ has rescued and redeemed us in our lost and hopeless condition. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen