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**A Summary Workbook on
"The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel"
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Point 9 (First Part)

The fifth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel has to do with how a repentant person can find peace with God. A repentant person needs to find God's mercy and forgiveness in His Word and sacraments. A bad teacher gives a different kind of advice - "You should pray and struggle with God until you get the FEELING that He has forgiven you." This advice is wrong! We find true peace only in what God did and what God promised, not in our feelings.

In order to be sure of the right way of serving souls in this matter, we should take note of examples in the Bible. How did the apostles give comfort to sinners who were afraid because of their sins?

Look at Peter's sermon on Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. The people were alarmed because Peter showed that they were to blame for the death of Jesus on the cross. "Brothers, what should we do?" they asked. Peter told them to "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins." The word REPENT means to "change your mind." Since they were already in distress because of their sins, Peter called on them to "change their minds" about Jesus. They should recognize that in Jesus all their many sins are forgiven, and then they should be baptized in his name. Peter made no other demands. The people listening only needed to take comfort in God's promises of free forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ Jesus. He did not tell them to continue to struggle and wrestle with God, or any other such thing.

Consider again the story of the Jailer of Philippi in Acts 16. When the prison doors sprung open, and the chains fell off of the prisoners, the jailer was about to take his own life in despair. He must have thought "I might as well take my own life instead of being put to death because of these escaped prisoners." But Paul called out to the jailer so that he would not harm himself. The jailer was still in great distress. He had nearly died and did not know what would happen after that. But he knew that Paul had the answer, so he asked "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul did NOT say "this will not be easy - there is a long list of things you must do before you can be confident about going to heaven." And so, on that same night, the jailer became a Christian. He was fully forgiven and was made a child of God, simply by receiving the invitation of the Gospel that Paul gave: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, both you and your household." Note carefully - he did NOT demand a long program of instruction. He did NOT put this man through a test to see if he would change his life around. He simply told him the Gospel and washed this man and his family clean from sin through Holy Baptism.

In Acts 22, Paul tells the story of his own conversion. He waits in blindness for a disciple to visit him. This disciple was named Ananias. Ananias does NOT say to Paul, "You must first struggle in prayer until you get a strong feeling of God's forgiveness." No, his message is simple: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." This is the right order--first receiving God's grace and then praying, not praying for the grace of God. If you want to be the right kind of pastor then you will also follow this pattern. When you are dealing with a sinner who has already been crushed by the Law, immediately announce the full assurance of God's grace in Christ.

There are many false teachers who do not follow the right path in this matter. Yes, many of them preach the Law very sternly, as they should. But then they take a wrong turn. They do not preach the Gospel right away to people who are alarmed and in distress about their sins. Instead they give them a long list of steps they must take before they can be sure of going to heaven. They say there must be a long struggle in prayer, with great crying for mercy. This must be followed by a sudden feeling of joy in God's grace. They say that the sinner must mark the day and the hour that they "gave their heart to Jesus." But this kind of emotional

experience be misleading. It might not be the Holy Spirit's work in the heart, but only an emotional reaction to the preacher. Many such people later doubt their own feelings and decisions from before. They often wonder whether a sinner like themselves can really belong to God or not. This false reliance on inner emotional experiences happens because of three errors:

1) Some false teachers look at God as someone who is very hard to deal with. They say that we must soften God's heart with our own tears and struggles. But that can't be true, because Jesus fully reconciled us to God long ago. He has already fully softened God's heart, and now His grace and love extend to every sinner. Many false teachers preach a false "gospel" that says, "God is willing to save you, if you first show that you are willing to be saved." But that is not the Gospel! The real Gospel is this: God already IS reconciled to sinners. Because of Jesus, God has already provided the holiness that we need to get to heaven.

2) Many false teachers make the Gospel into something that a man must do in order to qualify for God's grace. The real Gospel says "You are ALREADY redeemed from every sin. You ARE reconciled to God. Every sin is ALREADY forgiven."

3) Many false teachers consider "faith" to be a quality in a man that improves him enough so that he can go to heaven. It is true that faith in Christ changes a person from the inside and produces love. Faith cannot be separated from love, in the same way that fire cannot be separated from heat. This is a fine feature of faith, but it is NOT the reason God forgives us. He forgives us ONLY because of what Jesus has already done for us, which the Holy Spirit gives to us.

QUESTIONS

1. What did Peter say on the day of Pentecost to bring true Gospel comfort to the people?
2. What did Paul say to the Jailer of Philippi to bring him true Gospel comfort?
3. What kind of pattern should we follow as pastors to bring true comfort to our members?
4. What is the wrong pattern that many false teachers follow, when speaking to sinners in distress?
5. What is the ONLY reason God forgives our sins?