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

Review:

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.

The correct view of the Gospel is found in confessional Lutheran churches. Many other church groups hate this teaching. For example, they say "Baptism with water can't deliver the forgiveness of sins; what you need is Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire." But it is the Bible itself that says that Baptism washes away sins (Acts 22:16). The Bible says that a person must be born of "water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). The Bible says that in Baptism the Christian has "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27), and calls Baptism a "washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5-7).

Again, they say "there is no benefit to eating and drinking Jesus' true body and blood with the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper; what you need is a hungry and thirsty soul that eats and drinks spiritual truth." But the Bible describes the Lord's Supper as a heavenly feast on earth. In this sacrament we do not receive only bread and wine, but also the true body and blood of Jesus. Together with these, the Holy Spirit gives us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. We know this because Jesus said, "This is my body, which is given FOR YOU." He wanted his disciples to know that he was giving them the same body and blood that he was about to give for the world on the cross to pay for the sins of the world. It is meant to be a great comfort and joy to know that this forgiveness was given to each of them personally in the sacrament. In the same way he said, "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed FOR YOU."

In the same way, many false teachers are against the Bible teaching of "absolution," which is the way that the pastor announces the forgiveness of sins in church. The truth is the pastor does not announce his OWN forgiveness to the people. He announces forgiveness from JESUS and in Jesus' name. Jesus said to his disciples: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21). His meaning is, "In the same way that the Father has given me words to speak, I am giving you words to speak, words of forgiveness in my name." He then tells his disciples (again from John 20): "If you forgive the sins of anyone they are forgiven. If you do not forgive their sins, they are not forgiven."

The Bible makes it very clear that the true Spirit of God comes to us only through the Word of God, and the promises of God's Word in the sacraments, which are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These sacraments are sometimes called "the visible Word." This is a good way to look at them. It is God's way of delivering His promises to us personally in the water of Baptism and in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Many false teachers speak against the true meaning of the sacraments, and also against the pastor's announcement of forgiveness in the absolution. They say, "It can do no good for a mere man to say 'your sins are forgiven,' because he can't look into my heart. Instead I need to have God himself speak directly to my heart." They think that Lutherans are too much like Catholics in these things.

Our Lutheran teaching is not like Catholic teaching at all. Our teaching on "the office of the keys" is just what the Bible says: Jesus gave the power to forgive sins to his Church on earth. It was not just to the preachers, but to all believers. Here are the scriptural reasons why our churches practice absolution during the worship service:

1) Jesus Christ became guilty of all our sins, in our place. He was and is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) He did this for all people of all time, without exception.

2) When Jesus rose from the dead, this proved that God had fully forgiven all sinners. With Jesus' words, "It is finished," God was completely satisfied and offered this free forgiveness to all.

3) When Jesus told his disciples to "preach the Gospel to every creature," this meant that they were to proclaim the good news of God's forgiveness to all people. Nothing remains that people must do. Instead, simply believe that all has ALREADY been done by Jesus.

4) Jesus wants his disciples to do more than announce forgiveness to all people in general. He wants us to deliver this good news to each individual sinner. We are to tell each one "YOU are reconciled to God." This is true because God has forgiven all people; He has forgiven each person.

5) Every Christian, not just a pastor, is given this job by Jesus. Even a small child has the same power to announce God's forgiveness that the pastor has. In our everyday church life the pastor does this more often, because the congregation has called him to use God's Word and the sacraments in their place.

Yes, sorrow for sins and repentance is necessary for true faith. But God does not forgive a person because he reaches a certain level of sorrow. Dr. Martin Luther was correct when he said that we should not try to precisely measure people's sorrow over sin. The main thing, he says, is to put your full trust in these words of Jesus: "Your sins are forgiven." Those who hear these words but do not believe them are calling Jesus a liar, and they throw away his grace.

What if someone hears the words of Christ's forgiveness but is secretly an evil, ungodly unbeliever? If this is unknown to us, it is his own fault that Jesus' words of forgiveness do not help him. Yes, God has forgiven his sins too. But to get a treasure there must be one who gives and also one who receives. A man who is determined to remain in sin and unbelief does not receive the precious gift that God wants to give also to him.

There is such a thing as a fake Christian. This is someone who has never felt the guilt of his own real sin and has never felt the joy of the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ. They take false comfort in the idea that they attend church, but their hearts are as cold as ice. Maybe they say with their mouths, "I believe," but their hearts do not actually rest on Christ.

Romans 5:1 - "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Genuine peace with God was already made real by Jesus' death, even before we believed it. Surely the apostle is talking about a peace which is felt deeply in your heart.

Romans 14:17 - "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." This "joy" is not earthly. It is spiritual. No other kind of joy compares to it.

Examples from the Bible also show us that faith is a living thing in a person's heart. How else could David write, in Psalm 103, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity" ?

The experience of true Christians who are around us also show that this is true. Every believer is moved to grateful love for God at the thought of the Savior's love for him. At the same time, each believer is still alarmed and frightened by the threats of God's Law when he hears them.

It is a terrible mixture of Law and Gospel when anyone says that a person must pray, struggle, and wrestle with God before a mysterious sense of joy comes; that it is only when this happens that a person can know that his sins are forgiven. The grace that we need is not found in our hearts; no, it is found in GOD'S heart. FIRST a person trusts in God's gracious favor, THEN he experiences the peace and joy that this grace brings. It is a mistake to measure your faith by your own feelings. If your faith is based on your own feelings, it isn't real faith. Real faith must hold on tightly to God's promises, which are true no matter what we are feeling. The true believer knows that "I am confident of grace only because of God's promises in Christ; that's what I build on."

1 John 3:19-20 - "By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything."

When a man's conscience accuses him, his heart will tell him that he does not have grace, is not a child of God, and is damned to hell. The apostle says to this kind of person, "Yes, your heart is judging you, but it is only a lower judge. The highest judge is God, and he is far above your heart. Let your heart be at peace, because God is the judge in the highest court, and his word cancels every other judgment. HE has declared that your sins are forgiven. It is this promise that will stand."

John 20:27-29 - "[Jesus] said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

Hebrews 11:1 - "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Both of these passages teach that faith comes before feeling. Jesus' answer to Thomas means that we must first believe and then see, not the other way around. It must then be certain that we do not feel first. Instead we believe the promises of God, who then grants us sweet peace and joy. In the same way the Hebrews passage says that we believe without first seeing. Our trust is in the promise of God, whose Word cannot fail.

False teachers have this in common - they urge people to first look inward for evidence that they are children of God. Many imagine that all is well because they are now living a holy life. The real path to peace and life is to look outward, to our Savior, every day. We must come to his cross every day with our sins, and hear his promise of forgiveness and life daily. We must not put our trust in our conversion, but daily put our trust in Christ.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is it bad advice to direct an alarmed sinner to his own feelings?
2. Why is there such great comfort in your Baptism, and in the Lord's Supper?
3. In what way can the pastor actually forgive the sins of repentant sinners?
4. In what way is Lutheran teaching different from Catholic teaching in the matter of announcing the forgiveness of sins?
5. Briefly, in your own words, explain why our teaching about absolution is truly found in the Bible.
6. Why does God forgive the sinner?
7. What happens to those who hear God's Word of forgiveness but don't feel that they need any forgiveness?
8. What does it mean to say "faith comes before feeling"?