



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

**A Summary Workbook on  
"The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel"  
by Dr. C.F.W. Walther**

**Point 16**

**The twelfth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel is when the preacher tries to make people believe that they are truly converted when they give up certain sins or bad habits, or when they do good works.**

This is one of the worst ways that people mix up the Law and the Gospel. It is a truly awful preacher who leads his people to think that they are good Christians if they have given up adultery, stealing, or other outward sins. This turns the Gospel into another law because he is saying that salvation is something that the people must do. Genuine conversion and real faith comes into our hearts only by God's work and promises. It comes only by the Gospel.

This terrible false teaching comes from those who trust in their own minds and reason, instead of in God's Word. They imagine that the first thing that must happen is that a person gives up sins and vices, then afterward he will become a new person and a child of God.

The opposite is really true. First, God brings the sinner to know the great guilt of his sins. Then, God's promises of grace because of Jesus lead that person to faith, which makes him a new person. THEN the believer has such joy and confidence in Christ that he desires to serve the Lord with a holy life.

Jesus here shows that the inner change or new birth comes first: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) Again, this change must be worked by God, and comes from the inside before it shows on the outside: "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit." (Matthew 12:33)

Many times pastors and congregations mix up Law and Gospel when they are dealing with church members who are living in unrepentant sins. For example, if a man is living with a woman who is not his wife, the church should preach stern law to him and remove him from the congregation if he does not repent. What if he leaves that sin behind and is no longer committing adultery? That is good, but leaving one certain sin doesn't make a person a Christian. The pastor and congregation must care for this person enough to find out whether he repents of ALL of his sins, and finds forgiveness and life in Jesus.

What if a church member neglects to attend worship and never comes to the Lord's Supper? If he has the opportunity to participate, then neglecting the Word of God and Christian fellowship is a terrible sin. If such a person comes back to church for a few Sundays, the pastor must be careful to find out whether God's Word has really changed them on the inside or not. If the pastor fails to do this, he is neglecting the soul of that person.

The best works and the ones that God values the most are those which we do because we are grateful for the gift of Jesus. Dr. Martin Luther said that everything the Christian does, even the most simple things, are God's work. His heart is made pure, not because of his own works, but because of Jesus. From a pure fountain nothing but good, sweet water can flow.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Why is it so damaging to tell someone that they are a true Christian if they only give up certain sins?
2. What is the true order of God's work? Is it A) A person lives a more holy life, and then becomes a child of God, or B) A person becomes a child of God, then lives a more holy life? Explain your answer.

3. What does Matthew 12:33 have to do with this order of God's work?
4. Why should we be concerned with a church member's entire Christian life, rather than just giving up one certain sin?
5. It is important to God not only that we do good works, but also the reason WHY we do the good works. What is the best reason to live a holy life?