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**A Summary Workbook on
"The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel"
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Point 17

The thirteenth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel is when someone describes faith, including its strength and the good works that it produces, in a way that is not true of all believers at all times.

Inexperienced pastors sometimes have a strong desire to make their members wake up from their lazy, sinful lives. They go on and on about all the holy works that God demands from them. However, the preacher must not go beyond the Word of God, or he will harm the souls of his members.

It is good and right to warn people against hypocrisy and a lazy Christian life. However, warning against such things must not be his final goal. The real and final goal is to lead his people to greater trust and confidence in Jesus, the forgiveness that he earned for us on the cross, and the confidence that they will certainly be in heaven because of Jesus' promises.

The preacher must be careful to recognize that true believers still fall into many sins, yet because their hearts still trust in Jesus they are children of God at the same time.

"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." (Romans 7:18)

Here Paul uses himself as an example to show that a Christian still has two sides in this life. The Christian wants to do good, but very often finds that he fails to do it. When he does commit sin, he is ashamed of it. The fact that he continues to sin each day does not mean he is no longer a child of God, as long as he brings his sins to Jesus daily for forgiveness.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

So the preacher has to describe the Christian life as it really is. He must tell his people that their personal lives must be perfect in order to receive God's grace, since there is no one who can live such a holy life in this world.

"For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin..."¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." (Romans 7:14, 18)

Because of his sin, the Christian feels like a slave. However, he is not a WILLING slave to sin, but wants to be free from it. He finds his freedom and confidence in Jesus. There at the cross he also finds the greater desire to live a better life for God.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)

The Christian has a daily struggle to cast aside the sins that still come up in his life. He cannot be completely free from them. If he could do that, he would always be a cheerful hero. As it is he must repent each day, and find his comfort and forgiveness in Christ each day. This is the reason why Jesus taught us, in the Lord's Prayer, to ask God every day to "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

Because of all this, be careful that you speak about the Christian life in a realistic way. If people listen to you and think, "I must have a perfectly sinless life or I am LOST," then you are doing terrible harm to them. This would rob them of God's grace. Instead, let them know that whenever they sin this is a very serious matter, but they should go to Jesus' cross right away to find their Savior. Then, with this comfort, they can make it their goal to do better in the future.

There are other ways that a preacher sometimes describes a Christian in a way that is not realistic. For example, he may say that the Christian must be as patient as Job. He might say "Even if you take everything away from a Christian, he will still be cheerful and say what Job said when he lost everything - 'The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.' (Job 1:21)" Yes, Job said these words, but not all Christians have the same strength of faith that Job had. A true Christian can sometimes be impatient. Sometimes he complains. These are not good things, but they do not mean that he isn't a Christian.

Is it possible for a true Christian to commit a really terrible sin? Yes, this does happen, but when he remembers God's Law and his Gospel he repents of the sin and finds God's grace in Christ.

Sometimes a preacher describes a Christian as a person who never has a fear of death. This can do great harm. Most people, including Christians, do have fear in their hearts about death. Yes, the promises of God's grace and the resurrection to eternal life should bring great comfort, but there is no point in painting a false picture of a Christian.

Even the great sin of pride can often show in a Christian's life. Remember that Jesus' own disciples argued with each other about who was the greatest. In fact every Christian in this life has some kind of pride that he must fight against.

Again, it would be a false picture of the Christian to say that he is always devoted to prayer, and this is his most cherished daily activity. Yes, he ought to be fervent in prayer, but we all find that we struggle to take time for prayer and to be confident that God will certainly answer our prayers in the right way.

We certainly should hold up good examples to our church members. It helps to have such examples, so that we make it our goal to live up to a high level of faith, and fruits of faith. You should not, however, lead your people to despair because of the way they still struggle with their own sins and imperfections. We all do struggle that way!

"For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." (Galatians 5:17)

QUESTIONS

1. What should be the final goal of a pastor, in his preaching and teaching?
2. How do we know that true Christians still fall into many kinds of sins?
3. What does the true Christian do with his sins and guilt?
4. What are the two "sides" of a Christian's life that are always present in his heart?
5. Why is it necessary to keep on praying, as we do in the Lord's prayer, "forgive us our sins"?
6. What are some examples of the unrealistic ways that preachers sometimes speak about the Christian life?
 - A)
 - B)
 - C)
 - D)
7. How does Paul describe the struggle on the inside of a Christian in Galatians 5:17?
8. See Romans 7:22-25. What is the solution for this great struggle on the inside of a Christian?