



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 3**

**Understanding and teaching the difference between the Law and the Gospel is the hardest and most advanced skill that any Christian can learn. This is especially true for pastors and Bible teachers. This skill is learned only by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the school of experience.**

The basic idea behind the difference between the Law and the Gospel is actually quite easy to learn. Even a child can do it. What we are really talking about is putting this teaching to use in real-life situations. You cannot figure out for yourself how to do this correctly.

First, it is hard to apply this to yourself as a Christian. This is the most difficult thing for a Christian to learn. Consider King David from the Old Testament. In Psalm 51:10-11, he prays to God for a right spirit. After his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and after murdering her husband, he was in terrible doubt about whether God had forgiven him. Many of David's psalms show that he was miserable because of his guilt. David knew about God's Law and his Gospel very well. But when he fell into sin himself, he had terrible trouble in applying this teaching to his own situation. In his distress he cried out to God, "Create a new spirit within me."

Remember the story of Peter's miraculous catch of fish in Luke chapter 5. Peter followed Jesus' direction to let down his nets, even though he didn't expect to catch anything. By a miracle they caught so many that their nets began to break. That is when Peter was gripped by great fear. He thought to himself "That must be the almighty GOD who has spoken to me. He is my creator, and he will be my judge!" That's why Peter fell down at Jesus' feet and said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" And why was he so scared? It was because he felt exposed as a sinner in front of God. The devil robbed him of all comfort. He expected only that Jesus would kill him then and there. He was unable to apply both Law and Gospel to himself. If he had remembered the Gospel, he would have been cheerful in front of Jesus his Savior.

Consider 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 our heart does not condemn us it is easy to know the difference between the Law and the Gospel. But when his heart DOES condemn him his conscience makes him very aware of how guilty he is. If he can apply the difference between the Law and the Gospel correctly, then he will take comfort in the free gift of Jesus' forgiveness. Then he can say, "God is greater than my heart. His Word of forgiveness must be true. Because he said so, it is true also for me." What a great blessing if you learn how to do this! But you will always only be a beginner at it. Just remember to hold tight to God's Gospel promises when the Law condemns you.

Sometimes there is a fierce struggle between the Law and the Gospel on the inside of you. The Gospel says: "You are loved by God because of his grace in Christ." The Law says: "Don't believe it! How could that be true when you look at all the terrible sins you have done?" Whenever this happens, you must say to the Law, "Away with you! Jesus has paid my debt in full, and he has kept all of your demands for me!" This conflict is not a problem for a person who is dead in his sins (a non-believer); he doesn't think about the Law or care about it. But the problem is real to a person who believes.

Second, understanding and applying the difference between the Law and Gospel is especially difficult for the pastor or Bible teacher. In fact, nothing is more important to learn than this.

Remember 2 Timothy 2:15: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." This shows that knowing and applying the Law and the Gospel correctly is a difficult thing. It requires skill.

Notice also Luke 12:42-44: "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions." By "food" the Savior means spiritual nourishment. The servants are not just supposed to give any kind of food to the people in the household. They are supposed to give them the right food at the right time. The lesson for us here is this: a Bible teacher needs to know how to give people exactly the kind of message from the Bible that they need, whether Law or Gospel.

2 Corinthians 2:16 and 3:4-6: "To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? ...Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." God is the only one who can provide us with the ability to do this difficult work.

Preach the Law so that everybody who is careless about sin understands, "He means me. He is talking about exactly the hypocrite that I am." Preach the Gospel so that every person who repents and is sorrowful about his sins says: "That comfort and forgiveness is meant for me; God wants me to be his own and have peace!"

And so, the preacher must learn how to describe correctly what each of his hearers is like on the inside. A listing of biblical teachings without a connection to individuals will not get the job done. A person may know about true Bible teachings, but he is still not connected personally to God unless he knows for certain that: A) His sins are a terrible and ugly debt that he owed to God, and B) That debt has already been paid in full by Jesus.

It is even more difficult for a pastor to rightly divide the Law and Gospel when he is serving individuals privately. When he is preaching in church he can say a number of different things, hoping that an individual listener will take them to heart. But when an individual talks to the pastor to get advice, the pastor has a difficult problem. He should be able to tell if the individual is a Christian or not, although it is possible for a pastor to be fooled by a hypocrite who acts like a godly person. If a person is trying to fool the pastor, then getting the wrong message is his own fault. But it is a fearful thing if a person gets the wrong message and it is the pastor's fault.

Not all unchristian people are alike. One may be loud and abusive and opposed to religion and say bad things about the Bible. Another may know all the true teachings of the Bible in his head, but does not truly trust in God's grace in his heart. Some are addicted to bad things of this world, others think they have no true faults. Some might be filled with dread but don't know why. The pastor should be able to recognize what kind of problem is in front of him in order to provide the correct "medicine" that will help them. This is the very difficult skill I am talking about. I am trying to convince you that the only way to be able to do this work is to be given the gift from the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the hardest thing is dealing with people who you know to be real Christians and giving them the proper Word of God for their individual spiritual condition. One has a weak faith, one a strong faith; one is cheerful, another sorrowful; one is lazy, another burning to do good works; one has little spiritual knowledge, another is fully instructed in God's Word.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. How does a person learn the skill to correctly teach the difference between the Law and the Gospel?
2. Why was it difficult for David and Peter to apply the Law and the Gospel to themselves?
3. What Scripture verses can a person apply to himself to resolve his own feelings of guilt?
4. What did Jesus mean, in Luke 12:42-44, about giving the "right food at the right time?"
5. How does a preacher make the Law and the Gospel plain to his listeners PERSONALLY?
6. Why is it sometimes very difficult to know how to give Scriptural counsel to an individual member?