



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 8

The fourth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel is when someone preaches the Law to a person who is already sorry and fearful because of his sins, or he preaches the Gospel to a person who is not concerned at all about his sins.

First, we consider the wrong way to speak to someone who already feels the guilt of their sins and are fearful because of them. Isaiah 61:1-3 shows us that people who are already repentant, with sorrow in their hearts about their sins, should only hear the comfort of God's promises of forgiveness in Christ: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn."

This was the way that Jesus worked with people who were already sorry about their sins. See Luke chapter 7. A woman who was a "sinner" knelt down, washed Jesus' feet with her hot tears, and dried them with her hair. She was crushed in her heart and without any comfort. Jesus did not say anything to her about her sins - not even one word. All he said was "your sins are forgiven."

The Lord treated Zacchaeus the same way (see Luke 19). He was a short man and a tax collector. He knew that he was a sinner, and climbed a tree to see Jesus as he passed by. Jesus called him down from the tree and said "I must come to your house today." Zacchaeus probably expected that Jesus would speak harshly about Zacchaeus' many sins. But Jesus didn't do that. Instead, he said, "Salvation has come to this house!" That's when Zacchaeus freely offered to give his wealth to the poor. Jesus did not demand this of him. It was Zacchaeus' own response to the gift of salvation.

Consider also the parable of the lost son (Luke 15). After this son had wasted all his father's money, he returned home in sorrow and shame. The father was waiting for him, and had no words of blame at all. Instead, he called for a celebration because his lost son had been found.

The same thing happened even while Jesus was on the cross. Next to him was a career criminal who was also being crucified. When he saw Jesus' patient suffering, he looked to him in faith and said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42) He recognized that Jesus is the Messiah. Notice that Jesus did not say, "What? I am supposed to remember someone like you who has done all these evil things?" Jesus said nothing like that. Instead, he promised the man that he would be with Jesus in paradise on that very day.

Jesus shows us by these examples what we should say to a poor sinner who is already crushed by guilt and who is afraid because of his sins. We should not waste time by reviewing all the terrible sins in his past. Instead, we should speak God's forgiveness to him and comfort him.

The apostles did the same thing that Jesus did in this matter. Remember the story from Acts chapter 16 about the jailer at Philippi? All through the night he had listened to Paul and Silas singing hymns while in jail. When God made the jail's doors open and the chains fall off, the jailer was about to kill himself. Paul stopped him, and the jailer cried out, "what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas did not give him several steps that he had to take, such as feeling more sorrow than he already did. Their message was simple: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household." This was a simple

invitation to receive God's mercy. That's all that faith really is - receiving the mercy of God, the grace of God.

Second, we consider the wrong way to speak to someone who feels very comfortable in their sins and intends to keep living in them, with no repentance. It is very harmful to offer the comfort of the Gospel to sinners who feel secure while they are still living in sin. Of course, in a church service we must preach the Gospel to all, even to some who may be in church who have no repentance in their hearts. But we should do this in a way that makes it plain to unrepentant people that this comfort is not meant for them.

Matthew 7:6 - "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs." The holy things, the pearls, are the words of comfort of the Gospel of forgiveness. We should not offer these things to "dogs" or "pigs." This means that we should not give God's promises of grace to the enemies of the Gospel or to those who are determined to keep on sinning.

Isaiah 26:10 - "If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness; in the land of uprightness he deals corruptly and does not see the majesty of the Lord." It is useless to offer the mercy of God to godless unbelievers. Either they think they do not need it, or that they already have all of it. "My sins are not so bad," they say. I should not give the Gospel to this kind of person because it will not do him any good. When a wicked person wants to remain in his sins he "does not see the majesty of the Lord," as Isaiah writes. He does not understand what grace means. He thinks to himself "If all I have to do is believe, then good! I can stay the way I am and I will still go to heaven, because I believe in Jesus, too." But whoever thinks he can stay in his sins believes in an imaginary Jesus, not the real Jesus.

Our model for preaching and teaching is found first in Christ. Whenever he met sinners who were secure and comfortable as they were, he gave them no comfort at all. That's what the proud Pharisees were like. He called them "serpents" and pronounced eight different "woes" on them! (See Matthew 23) Jesus told them that they would not escape eternal damnation. He fearlessly told them the truth, and we should follow his example when we are speaking to people who have no repentance. When you are speaking to a mixed group (like in church) you must do this in a way that makes it clear that this Law is meant for secure sinners, not for the repentant.

True, Jesus says "Come unto me ALL," (Matthew 11:28), but he adds right away "those who labor and carry heavy burdens." In this way he shows that his invitation for rest is meant only for those who feel the guilt of their sins.

Another example is found with Jesus and the rich young ruler in Mark chapter 10. This man asked Jesus what he should do to gain eternal life. Jesus told him to "keep the commandments." He was preaching Law to him. The young man claimed that he had kept the commandments ever since he was a boy. "What do I still need?" he asked Jesus. And what was the answer from Jesus? Did he say, "You must have faith"? NO. Jesus knew that he was speaking to a man who was secure in his sins and self-righteous. He didn't give him any Gospel at all. Instead he told him to sell all of his goods and give all his money to the poor. This the young man could not do. He went away sad. We can be sure that the Law began to work on him. He must have thought, "I cannot do this thing. I'm too attached to my possessions. According to the teaching of Jesus, I'm not going to heaven at all, but to hell instead." This is the very thing that Jesus wanted to accomplish. He wanted to tear down this man's pride, so that he might receive the Gospel later.

The apostles of Jesus did the same thing. In Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts chapter 2), he accused the crowd of murdering Jesus by having him crucified. They were frightened and asked Peter, "What should we do?" Peter told them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. He preached the Gospel to them. He told them that even the very worst sins were all forgiven because of that same Jesus. The other apostles preached the same way in all the early churches. Everywhere they preached, they began with repentance (the Law), and then faith (the Gospel).

Sometimes people imagine that they can continue in all kinds of sins whenever they want, and still be called "Christian" because they go to church. The pastor must care about their souls, so much that he is willing to preach the harshest Law to them. We must preach them into hell before we can preach them into heaven. People who are comfortable with their sins need to be brought to the pit of spiritual death before we can lift them up to life with the Gospel. First we show them what filthy rags they are wearing in their sins. Then we show them the shining garment of Jesus' holiness that he gives to them freely. You must first reduce

this person to nothing before you can show them what God has created in them by faith in Christ, for his glory, by the Gospel.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the one speaking in Isaiah 61:1-3? In your own words, what is his message?
2. Did the father of the lost son in Luke 15 have any words of judgment or criticism when his son returned home? Why or why not?
3. How many holy works did Paul demand from the Jailer of Philippi in Acts 16? What was Paul's message to him?
4. In Matthew 7:6, what is meant by "pearls"? What is meant by "pigs"?
5. What is the condition of a person who thinks that they can keep on with a sinful life, with no repentance? What message from the Bible should be brought to such a person?
6. When Jesus invites sinners to come to him for rest (Matthew 11:28), what kind of sinners does he mean?
7. Why, in Mark chapter 10, did Jesus tell the rich young man to give away all his money?
8. What does it mean that we should "preach people into hell before we can preach them into heaven"?