



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

Two Kinds of Words from One God

In His love for the human race and in His desire to rescue us from the condemnation we deserve, our all-wise and merciful God has chosen to speak to mankind with two kinds of words or messages. Both come from the same mouth or source and are equally God's Word. Both are necessary for our salvation, but in totally different ways. One of these words is intended to knock us down, and the other word is intended to lift us up.

The apostle Paul describes these two kinds of speaking and their functions in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth: "**Our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). The two kinds of speaking are called "**the letter**" and "**the Spirit**". Notice that the letter "**kills**". but the Spirit "**gives life**". Notice also that "**the new covenant**" is not a covenant of the letter, but a covenant of the Spirit. The fact that there is a new covenant implies that there was an old covenant, and, as we shall see, the old covenant is "**the letter**" that kills.

In the words that follow, the apostle makes his meaning clear. He says: "**But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory**" (2 Corinthians 3:7-9).

Notice that the letter that kills is here given two different names. It is called "**the ministry of death**" and "**the ministry of condemnation**". On the other hand, the new covenant of the Spirit that gives life is called "**the ministry of the Spirit**" and "**the ministry of righteousness**". Now it becomes clear what Paul means by the letter that kills, that is, the ministry of death and condemnation. He describes it as something that was written and engraved on stones, and he refers to Moses. Thus, with the term "**letter**" Paul is referring to God's law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, which were written on two stone tablets by the Lord God Himself and spoken from Mt. Sinai by the Lord God Himself in the presence of Moses and the Israelites. It is the letter of the law that kills. It is the law of God that is the ministry of death and condemnation. For a full description of what happened on Mt. Sinai when God gave His law to His people, read Exodus 19:2 – 20:21.

But the law is not God's last word to His people. As glorious as God's law is, there is something much more glorious: "**the new covenant**", the speaking "**of the Spirit**", "**the ministry of the Spirit**" and "**the ministry of righteousness**". In contrast with the law, which kills, this kind of speaking "**gives life**". This kind of speaking gives us the gift of "**righteousness**".

The Gospel of John presents these two kinds of speaking in fewer words than Paul, saying only: "**The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ**" (John 1:17). Moses was the one through whom God gave to His people the righteous demands of His law (the old covenant). Jesus, the Messiah, is the One through whom God gives to us the blessings of His grace and truth (the new covenant).

In his letter to the Galatians the apostle Paul sharply distinguishes between these two kinds of speaking. He wants the Galatians to consider which type of speaking brought them the blessings of

the Holy Spirit. He asks: “**Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?**” (Galatians 3:2). Did the law give you the blessings of the Holy Spirit? Or was it that other kind of speaking, where God did not give you something to do, but something to believe? That is, “**the hearing of faith**”. Paul is referring to the grace and truth that has come through Jesus Christ, the good news of life and righteousness. Paul wants the Galatians to realize that it was not the law of God that brought them the Spirit and His blessings, but the message of grace and truth and life and righteousness.

Later in this same letter Paul calls this second more glorious way of speaking “**the gospel**”, as in Galatians 3:8. Thus, the first way of speaking is known as the law, and the second more glorious way of speaking is known as the gospel, which simply means “good news”. A message that gives life and righteousness is indeed good news. A message that kills and condemns, namely, the law, is bad news. But we must know the bad news before the good news seems good to us. The bad news is that God’s law condemns us to death because we have not kept it and in fact could not keep it because of the kind of people we are. But the Gospel is good news, because God sent Jesus to win for us righteousness and life, so that we shall not die but live.

In the Old Testament this Gospel is known as “**the promise**” (Galatians 3:14, 16-18). “**The Scripture ... preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed’**” (Galatians 3:8). Abraham lived before Moses, and so the Gospel promise was already in effect before God gave the law through Moses. That is why Paul writes: “**The law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise**” (Galatians 3:17-18).

The inheritance that God wants us to enjoy is eternal life. How do we gain that inheritance? Is it by law or by promise? It cannot be both. Paul assures us that the inheritance was promised to Abraham, and he received it by believing the promise, not by doing the works of the law. The same is true of us as well. Paul says: “**So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’ ... Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith**” (Galatians 3:9-14).

The law curses us because we cannot keep it. But Jesus was cursed on the cross in our place, so that God could keep His promise of life. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus and what He did for us. In the Old Testament the Gospel came to God’s people as a promise of good things to come. In the New Testament the Gospel is the good news that God has kept His promise, Jesus has come to save us, and we have righteousness and life by faith in Him, that is, by trusting in what He did for us.

Since there are these two different ways in which God speaks to us – law and Gospel – it is important for every Christian and especially for every Christian leader or teacher, to understand the difference between law and Gospel, and to know when and how to speak to others in terms of law and when and how to speak to others in terms of Gospel, always remembering that the Gospel is much more glorious than the law.

Paul wrote to Timothy: “**Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth**” (2 Timothy 2:15). His point is that we need to know how to handle God’s Word, and this means that we need to know, both for ourselves and for others, how to use God’s law and God’s Gospel in the proper way, in accordance with God’s will.

Questions

1. What are the two kinds of speaking, according to 2 Corinthians 3:5-6?
2. What are the two kinds of speaking, according to 2 Corinthians 3:7-9?
3. Which kind of speaking is more glorious?
4. Why is this kind of speaking more glorious?
5. What are the two kinds of speaking, according to John 1:17?
6. How did the Galatians receive the Spirit?
7. What makes all of us accursed according to God's law?
8. How did God rescue us from the curse of the law?
9. Why is the more glorious way of speaking called the Gospel?