



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.2 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Similarities between the Law and the Gospel

Although the differences between the law and the Gospel are great, there are some similarities between them. Since both the law and the Gospel are recorded in Scripture, and all Scripture has been breathed out by God (2 Timothy 3:16), both the law and the Gospel have been given by divine revelation. The law and the Gospel are equally God's Word.

The first good news (Gospel) was spoken by God Himself in the Garden of Eden when He cursed the devil in the serpent shortly after Eve and Adam listened to Satan instead of listening to God. What God said was not good news for Satan, but it was good news for Adam and Eve: **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel"** (Genesis 3:15). This was the first promise of the coming Savior, the Seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent and thus take away Satan's power and undo the damage he caused by seducing our first parents into disobedience.

This promise of a Savior was repeated many times during the long years of the Old Testament. Sometimes the good news was transmitted directly by God, as when He spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and said to him: **"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."** But more often God spoke His good news through prophets whom He chose from among the people, such as Moses, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, all of whom spoke the good news God gave them to pass on to the world.

The law of God was spoken directly by God Himself in the language of the Israelites, for we read in Exodus 20:1-2: **"And God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,'"** and then God spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai. God's voice from Mt. Sinai frightened the people, and **"they said to Moses, 'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die'"** (Exodus 20:19). God then gave the rest of His laws to Moses, and Moses then conveyed God's words to the people. Most of the time in the Old Testament God used prophets like Moses to speak His law to His people. Before Moses died, he reminded the Israelites of that experience at the foot of Mt. Sinai, saying to them: **"The LORD talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire. I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire"** (Deuteronomy 5:4-5). But whether God spoke the law Himself or transmitted His law through prophets, the law of God as given in Scripture is the Word of God, just as the Gospel was and is the Word of God.

Another similarity between the law and the Gospel is that both law and Gospel apply to all persons who have ever lived on earth, past, present, and future. Even though God did not speak the Ten Commandments until the time of Moses, the law of God was there from the beginning. We are told by the apostle Paul that the Gentiles, the non-Jews, who did not hear God speaking the law to them, nevertheless had **"the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them"** (Romans 2:15). In other words, all persons on earth have a sense of God or a divine being in their inmost hearts, and an awareness within them that they are accountable to this God. And because this law is written in their hearts, they have a sense of right and wrong, so that when they do wrong, their thoughts accuse them, and when they do right, their thoughts excuse them.

There was a difference between the Jews and the Gentiles, since the Jews had the written laws of Moses, and the Gentiles did not. But because of this law written in the hearts of all, Paul says: **“For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law”** (Romans 2:12). The Gentiles will perish also, because the law written in their hearts condemns them, just as the law given on Mt. Sinai condemns the Jews. Paul therefore draws this conclusion: **“We have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. ... We know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:9-23).

The Gospel of the coming Savior applies to all persons also, for when God spoke the promise in the presence of Adam and Eve, the entire human race living at that time heard His words. The same was true after the flood when God repeated the promise of the Savior in the presence of the entire human race, which at that time numbered eight persons: Noah and his wife, and Shem, Ham, and Japheth and their wives. This universal promise was reaffirmed to Abraham and the patriarchs: **“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”** (Genesis 12:3; see also Genesis 26:4 and Genesis 28:14).

That the Gospel is intended for and applies to all persons was most clearly stated by Jesus Himself when He said to Nicodemus: **“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”** (John 3:16-17). The apostle Paul taught the same thing, writing to Timothy: **“God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all”** (1 Timothy 2:3-6). Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He instructed His disciples: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15).

Both law and Gospel are spiritual in nature, concerned not only with the external actions of persons but with the hearts and internal thoughts of persons. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: **“The law is spiritual”** (Romans 7:14). Jesus showed this in His Sermon on the Mount, when He pointed out that it was not only the outward actions of murder and adultery that were contrary to God’s law, but also lust and anger in the heart (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28).

Jesus also pointed out that the Gospel is spiritual, for in it and through it the Holy Spirit is at work. He said: **“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life”** (John 6:63).

Another similarity between the law and the Gospel is that both law and Gospel are intended for man’s eternal benefit. Even before they fell into sin, Adam and Eve were given the instruction: **“Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”** (Genesis 2:16-17). By keeping this instruction, they would have opportunity to show their love for God and their appreciation for God’s many blessings. Since they were created in the image of God, they had the ability to follow this word of God.

After they fell into sin, the law of God was still written in their hearts, but the perfect harmony between them and God was broken. Now any directive from God was seen as hostile to their sinful nature. The laws that God gave to Israel were given with the promise of life attached to them, but it was impossible for them to live up to God’s high standard. Perfect obedience to God was still presented as a way to gain eternal life. God through Moses told the people: **“You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the LORD”** (Leviticus 18:5). The law in itself is a valid way of attaining life. That it does not produce life is not the fault of the law, but the fault of the persons who are confronted by the law, because these persons cannot and do not obey the law. God through the prophet Ezekiel reminded the Israelites that their problems were not God’s fault: **“I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, which, if a man does, he shall live by them”** (Ezekiel 20:11).

In His conversation with a lawyer Jesus reiterated that thought. The lawyer asked Jesus: “**Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?**” Jesus responded: “**What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?**” After the lawyer recited the two tables of the law regarding love for God and love for neighbor, Jesus replied: “**You have answered rightly; do this and you will live**” (Luke 10:25-28). All the lawyer had to do to gain eternal life was to keep the law. Jesus wanted this lawyer to realize that he had not kept the law and could not keep it. For that reason, Jesus then told him the account of the good Samaritan to make him recognize that he was far from showing the kind of love in his life that the law of God demanded.

The apostle Paul summarized the problem in these words: “**The commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death**” (Romans 7:10). “**Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good**” (Romans 7:12). There is nothing wrong with God’s law. It can do what it promises to do. The problem is not with the law, but with the sinner who is confronted by the law. Paul says: “**We know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. ... For to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find**” (Romans 7:14-18). Since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, no human being has been able to obey the law in the way God wants it to be kept. It is for that reason that the law gives life to no one, even though life remains God’s reward for perfect obedience.

The only way God’s law leads to life among fallen mankind is in a negative way. That is, it crushes man’s pride and drives him to desperation over his inability to keep it, and thus makes a person not only aware of his sins but also of his innate sinful nature and his need for something else.

The Gospel, on the other hand, not only promises life but creates life and sustains life. Jesus said: “**As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life**” (John 3:14-16).

Questions

1. Show from Scripture that the law came from God.
2. Show from Scripture that the Gospel has come from God.
3. Show from Scripture that God’s law applies to all persons.
4. Show from Scripture that God’s Gospel applies to all persons.
5. What do we mean when we say that the law is spiritual?
6. Show from the Scripture that God’s law was intended to give life.
7. Why does God’s law not give life to anyone?
8. Why is the Gospel able to give life when God’s law could not?
9. What is the only way for a person to gain eternal life?