



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.3 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Uses of the Term “Law”

The Hebrew and Greek words translated into the English word “law” have various meanings in different contexts. In many Old Testament passages the word “law” simply means God’s Word in general, without specifically referring to God’s commandments. This is especially true in the book of Psalms, as, for example, Psalms 1, 19, and 119. **“Law”** and its synonyms in the following passages refer to God’s Word, which includes law and Gospel, and sometimes more Gospel than law:

- **“Blessed is the man”** whose **“delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night”** (Psalm 1:1-2). Since his meditation brings forth abundant fruit, it is clear this reference is to the whole Word of God, not just the commandments.
- **“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart”** (Psalm 19:7-8). The Ten Commandments do not convert the soul or rejoice the heart, but the Word of God does, especially the Gospel.

Psalm 119 is a long psalm in which almost every verse makes some kind of reference to God’s Word in a general way, including both law and Gospel. If we understand every reference to law or its synonyms as referring to the Ten Commandments, we will misunderstand what God is saying to us. These are the words that occur over and over in Psalm 119: **“law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments, word, way, ordinances.”** Here are some examples:

- **“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law”** (Psalm 119:18). We need special enlightenment to grasp the Gospel. The law is written in every one’s heart, to some extent.
- **“The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver”** (Psalm 119:72).
- **“Let Your tender mercies come to me, that I may live; for Your law is my delight”** (Psalm 119:77).
- **“Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction”** (Psalm 119:92).
- **“I long for Your salvation, O LORD, and Your law is my delight”** (Psalm 119:174).

In all of these passages it would seem that the psalmist has the Gospel in mind more than the Ten Commandments. The same thing can be said about similar words such as **“commandments, precepts, and statutes”**, which occur in this Psalm.

Sometimes the word **“law”** is used to refer specifically to the Old Testament. When some of the people were beginning to favor Jesus and some officers even failed to arrest Him because of His popularity, the Pharisees said: **“This crowd that does not know the law is accursed”** (John 7:49). In quoting an Old Testament passage in a debate with Jewish leaders, Jesus said: **“Is it not written in your law?”** (John 10:34). On another occasion Jesus said: **“This happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law”** (John 15:25). The Jewish people used the word **“law”** in the same way, saying

to Jesus on one occasion: “**We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever**” (John 12:34). They were not referring to the Ten Commandments but to the Old Testament. The apostle Paul followed the same usage, quoting an Old Testament passage after saying: “**In the law it is written**” (1 Corinthians 14:21).

Sometimes the word “**law**” does not refer to the whole Old Testament, but only to the five books of Moses as distinct from the prophets and the psalms, which are other two divisions of the Old Testament. Jesus spoke of “**the law and the prophets**” (Luke 16:16) and “**The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms**” (Luke 24:44). Jesus’ disciples Philip told his friend Nathanael: “**We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets wrote – Jesus of Nazareth**” (John 1:45). The synagogue service at Antioch in Pisidia included “**the reading of the Law and the Prophets**” (Acts 13:15). The apostle Paul told Governor Felix that he believed “**all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets**” (Acts 24:14). When he was a prisoner in Rome, Paul had a meeting with a number of Jews, “**persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening**” (Acts 28:23).

In some of Paul’s letters the word “**law**” has various meanings, which must be determined by the context. In the following passages it is clear that the word “**law**” does not refer to the Ten Commandments, or to the Old Testament, or to the writings of Moses:

- We read in Romans 3:27: “**Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.**” The meaning here is “principle” or “rule”. The point is that salvation alone by faith in Jesus rules out any idea of boasting on our part. If salvation were by works, boasting would not be excluded; we would be able to boast of our good works that saved us. But the principle of faith rules out boasting. The fact that we are saved by what Christ has done, rather than by what we have done, makes boasting impossible, except for boasting in Christ, on whom our salvation rests.
- In the seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul uses the term “**law**” in several ways. He says: “**I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good**” (Romans 7:21). Paul is speaking of himself as a Christian who still retains the old Adam (sinful flesh). Since he trusts in Christ and wants to please Him, he wants to do good things. But by experience he has learned the principle or truth that he is unable to do the good that he wants to do because his sinful flesh is still within him and obstructing him.
- A few verses further on, Paul writes: “**I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members**” (Romans 7:23). The “**law**” in Paul’s members is that law or principle of sin within him, that is, his sinful flesh which continues to struggle against the law of his mind, which is the new man in him created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Christ. It is one principle or law fighting against another law or principle, that is, the lusts of the flesh against the new man of the Holy Spirit.
- Paul concludes this discussion with these words: “**With the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin**” (Romans 7:25). “**The law of God**” is the will of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments. The new man of the mind is happy to serve God; as Paul says in Romans 7:22: “**I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.**” But with his flesh Paul continues to serve the law or principle of sin. Which principle gains the victory in this struggle? Paul explains: “**The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death**” (Romans 8:2).

In all of these passages we have to pay close attention to the context and to the point that Paul is trying to make in order to understand the specific sense which the word “**law**” has in that place.

In reading the psalms and the prophets it is important that we do not automatically equate the term “**law**” with the commandments of God. Sometimes the word “**law**” may even refer to the Gospel. For example, we read in Isaiah 2:3: **“Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”** What the prophet is prophesying here is the New Testament era, the coming of Christ, which was fulfilled when the Gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the salvation of the world went out from Jerusalem, beginning at Pentecost, but going out from there to all the Gentile nations. There are several other references to “**law**” in Isaiah that are really speaking of the Gospel of Christ. The same is true of the psalms, particularly Psalm 119, which we looked at earlier.

But when we speak of the doctrine of the law and the Gospel, we are thinking of the law as it is used in contrast to the Gospel, that is, as the Word from God that demands that human beings conform to God’s standard in attitude and conduct and pronounces God’s curse on those who fail to conform. The law is the doctrine or teaching that shows us what is right and God-pleasing and condemns everything that is contrary to God’s will and is therefore sinful. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: **“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. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:19-20). God’s law makes demands on us that we cannot satisfy. The law shows us our sin. The law uncovers the important truth that every single human resident of the world is a sinner who cannot stand in God’s judgment as a righteous or innocent person. He or she has not done the deeds the law of God requires.

Questions

1. Why must we say that the word “**law**” has more than one meaning in Scripture?
2. What does the word “**law**” mean in many of the psalms?
3. Give an example where it is clear that the word “**law**” really means the Gospel.
4. Give an example of where the word “**law**” refers to the Old Testament.
5. Give an example where the word “**law**” refers only to the books of Moses.
6. What does “**law**” mean in Romans 3:27?
7. What struggle is Paul talking about in Romans chapter 7?
8. What does “**law**” mean in Isaiah 42:3-4?
9. What does “**law**” mean in Romans 3:19-20?