



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Different Kinds of Law: Ceremonial

As far as the Old Testament Israelites were concerned, there was only one law, the law of God, and they promised to obey all of it. Even before God spoke the words of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, the people said to Moses: **“All that the LORD has spoken we will do”** (Exodus 19:8). The Lord God directly and also through Moses spoke many laws to the people, not only the Ten Commandments, but the many other laws contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Israelites were commanded to keep all of these laws, and they promised to keep them. We read in Exodus: **“Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words which the LORD has said we will do’”** (Exodus 24:3). There was no distinction made between one law or another. They were to do all the words which the Lord God spoke to them. They failed to keep their promises. Almost at once they broke the very first command the Lord spoke to them: **“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image”** (Exodus 20:3-4), by fashioning a golden calf and calling that image their God.

For us New Testament believers the situation is different. God Himself has made a distinction between the various laws He gave to His people. On the one hand, the Lord has repeated some of His laws and regulations through His apostles and He expects us even now to uphold these laws and strive to keep them. Jesus Himself repeated the laws that we call the first and second tables of the law: the command to love God and the command to love our neighbor. The apostles repeated the Ten Commandments as a standard for Christian behavior also for us. But on the other hand, the Lord specifically declared some of the commandments as obsolete and no longer applicable to us. From our perspective we label these laws that no longer apply to us ceremonial laws and civil laws. These laws were given only to the Israelites in the days before the coming of the Messiah.

For example, almost all the laws God gave to the people that are recorded in the book of Leviticus are ceremonial laws that have to do with the prescribed worship that the Lord commanded. This involved the tabernacle worship (and, later, the temple worship) with its sacred furniture, its sacrifices, and its priestly duties. All of this was spelled out for the people in detail. This is what we read in the first verses of Leviticus: **“When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of the livestock – of the herd and of the flock. If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD”** (Leviticus 1:2-3). Notice that the time and the place and the type of offering are all regulated by God. This is what we mean by the ceremonial law. There are pages and pages of such laws in Leviticus and the other books of Moses. Obedience to these laws was enforced, and there were consequences for those who disobeyed.

Among these ceremonial laws were laws having to do with food and drink. There were some animals that God declared unclean, and the Israelites were forbidden to eat them (Leviticus 11). Other laws had to do with special days and festivals. For example, the seventh day was the Sabbath, and the Israelites were forbidden to do ordinary work on those days. This commandment was strictly enforced. We read in the book of Numbers: **“While the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. ... Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp’** (Numbers 15:32-35).

The apostle Paul assures us that these ceremonial laws do not apply to us New Testament believers in Christ. There were some teachers in Colosse who were insisting that these ceremonial rules of the past must still be obeyed. But Paul wrote to them: **“Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ”** (Colossians 2:16-17). Paul also wrote to them: **“If you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations – ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh”** (Colossians 2:20-23).

Notice that Paul calls these rules about food and drink, and even the Sabbath rule, a shadow of things to come. If we see the shadow of a person approaching us, we look at the shadow to determine what he is like only when some obstruction prevents us from seeing the person himself. But as soon as we see the person himself, we pay no attention to the shadow. As long as the Messiah had not yet come, the Israelites paid attention to the various ceremonies, sacrifices, and rules that were pictures or symbols of Him and His work. But when the Messiah Himself came and fulfilled all these pictures and symbols, there is no longer any need to pay attention to His shadow.

Therefore no one should judge us, that is, no one should condemn us for what we eat or drink, or whether we celebrate the Old Testament festivals like the new moon or the Sabbath. Notice that even one of the Ten Commandments is no longer in effect in the way that God gave it to the Israelites. The Israelites were to remember the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a day of rest. They were not to work on that day, and if they disobeyed, they were punished. But Paul says that now that the Messiah has come, no one should condemn us for what we do on Saturday. The Sabbath law no longer applies to us, because the substance of Christ has replaced the shadow of the Sabbath.

In a similar way Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia: **“You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain”** (Galatians 4:10-11). The apostle Paul was teaching them the true way of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, but some of them were insisting that they still had to keep all the Old Testament regulations in order to be saved. Paul’s work among them would be in vain if they bound themselves to obedience to these Old Testament laws as being necessary for salvation. To the Romans Paul wrote: **“The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (Romans 14:17).

We can understand why the Jewish people, whose entire lives had been lived under Old Testament regulations, had a difficult time adjusting to the new circumstances of the New Testament era that began with the coming of their Messiah and the completion of His work. The apostle Peter himself, a lifelong Jew accustomed to the laws of the Old Testament regarding food and drink, had difficulty with this change. The Lord Himself had to do something extraordinary to convince Peter to adjust his thinking. This is what we read in the tenth chapter of the book of Acts: **“Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.’ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again”** (Acts 10:9-16). God was telling Peter that the Old Testament food laws were now obsolete.

The purpose of laws such as the law of food and drink was to keep the Jewish people separate from the Gentiles (non-Jews) until the coming of the Messiah. God had warned them over and over again in words like these: **“You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them, but you shall hold fast to the LORD your God”** (Joshua 23:7-8). The Gentiles ate unclean food; the Jews, therefore, could not eat with

them. But now that the Messiah had come, the Lord no longer wanted the Jews and Gentiles to be separate from each other.

At that very time when Peter had this housetop vision, he was being visited by three messengers from a Gentile soldier named Cornelius, asking Peter to go to this Gentile man's home and bring him the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As an Israelite under the Old Testament law, Peter would have declined the invitation. But we read in Acts: **"The Spirit said to him (Peter), 'Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them'"** (Acts 10:19-20). When Peter went to the home of the Gentile Cornelius, he told the assembled crowd: **"You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for"** (Acts 10:28-29).

This is a very important incident; it shows us the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. By this vision God Himself declared that the old barriers were gone, the old food laws were no longer in effect, and the ceremonies God gave to the Israelites were obsolete. Peter proclaimed the Gospel of Christ in the home of Cornelius, and the Holy Spirit manifested himself in a visible way just as on the day of Pentecost. Peter then said: **"Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"** (Acts 10:47).

Nevertheless, there were some influential members of the congregation at Jerusalem who objected to this abolition of Old Testament regulations. A number of them went from Jerusalem to other congregations and complained about the preaching of the Gospel to Gentiles and accepting them as members without teaching them to comply with Old Testament laws. They showed up in Antioch of Syria and in the Galatian congregations with this firm opinion: **"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"** (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas disagreed with these men, and it was decided to hold a meeting in Jerusalem with the apostles and elders to resolve this disagreement. At that meeting these same members from Jerusalem repeated their claim: **"It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses"** (Acts 15:5). They wanted all the ceremonial laws to remain as the law of God that must be obeyed, and they went even further by saying that salvation depended on the keeping of these laws.

Peter responded by showing them that God Himself had brought an end to these ceremonial laws, including circumcision. He said to them: **"Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they"** (Acts 15:7-11). This settled the matter.

Even though the Old Testament believers in Christ lived under the Old Testament ceremonial laws, they were certainly unable to keep them, and they certainly were not saved by keeping them. As Peter said, their Jewish fathers were unable to bear the yoke of the Old Testament regulations. Their failure to follow the ceremonial laws as well as the other laws they promised to keep showed that they were condemned sinners. The only way of salvation the Old Testament Israelites knew was faith in the promised Savior, just as our only way of salvation is faith in the Savior that came.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul had to deal with the false teachers who claimed that circumcision and the keeping of other regulations were necessary for salvation. In reply Paul said: **"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace"** (Galatians 5:1-4).

Paul's point is that there are two possible ways of salvation. One way works, and the other does not. The first way is keeping the law. Those who attempt that way must keep the whole law perfectly in every point in order to be saved, and no one is able to do that. The other way is the way of grace, the way of Christ, the way of faith in Christ. This is the only way of salvation that actually saves anyone.

The purpose of the sacrifices and the priesthood of the Old Testament is fully explained in the letter to the Hebrews. Here again we read that the ceremonies and sacrifices **"serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle"** (Hebrews 8:5). Here also we read that the first covenant was replaced with a new covenant. **"If that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second"** (Hebrews 8:7). **"In that He says, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete"** (Hebrews 8:13). **"He takes away the first that He may establish the second"** (Hebrews 10:9).

Questions

1. Which laws were the Israelites commanded to obey?
2. Which laws did they promise to obey?
3. How soon did they break their promise to obey God's laws?
4. What is meant by a ceremonial law?
5. Why do we New Testament Christians no longer have to obey the ceremonial laws?
6. How do we know we no longer have to keep the Sabbath law?
7. How did God show Peter he was no longer bound by the ceremonial laws?
8. What happened when Peter preached Christ in a Gentile home?
9. Why did Paul and Barnabas disagree with certain members from Jerusalem?
10. How did Peter settle the dispute between Paul and Barnabas and these members?
11. What does the Bible mean when it calls the ceremonial laws a shadow?
12. What kind of obedience must we have to get to heaven by the law?
13. What is the only true way of salvation?
14. What does the letter to the Hebrews say about the old covenant?