



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.10 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: God Is Serious

When God spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, He showed how serious He was about these commandments by adding a severe threat to those who reject His commandments in hatred. But He also added a word of promise and blessing to those begin to live in accordance with His commandments who in their fear and love and trust in Him. As we have seen, there is no one other than Jesus Himself who has kept or can keep God's commandments as they should be kept. God's law accuses us all of sin. But when people were brought to faith in the promise of the coming Savior or are brought to faith in the salvation worked out by the Savior in fulfillment of His promise, they begin to love Him who first loved them and in that love begin to do what the commandments tell us to do. To such believers as these God shows His mercy, even though they continue to sin against His commandments because of their sinful flesh.

The words of threat and promise were spoken by the Lord God after He spoke the First Commandment: **“For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments”** (Exodus 20:5-6). When Moses repeated the commandments of God to the next generation, he used the exact same words (Deuteronomy 5:9-10).

Even though God spoke these words in connection with the First Commandment, the words certainly apply to all the commandments. By calling Himself a **“jealous”** God, God wants to stress the extreme importance of taking His commandments seriously. He is zealous and energetic in the punishing of those who hate Him and break His laws. He is even more zealous and energetic in being merciful to those who love Him and start to keep His commandments. Since He alone is God, He is serious when he warns us to worship Him alone. Even as a husband surely wants and expects his wife to be faithful to him, so also God as the Husband of His people wants His bride, His people to be faithful to Him and to not worship other gods or consider other persons or things to be more important than Him. The honor that is due Him dare not go to another. God is the Bridegroom, and the bride is His people. Thus, idolatry and every form of disobedience is the same as spiritual adultery, a going after other gods or lovers.

When God speaks of showing mercy **“to thousands”**, He means thousands of generations. This is in contrast to the third and fourth generations whom He threatens with punishment. This is reinforced by Moses' words in Deuteronomy 7:9-10: **“Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face.”**

Other passages refer to God's **“jealousy”** as well. The land of Canaan that God promised to the Israelites was at that time occupied by idolaters who did not worship the LORD God of Israel. Therefore God said to His people: **“Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land”** (Exodus 34:12-15).

Moses repeated this instruction, saying to the next generation: “**For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God**” (Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29), and also: “**You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you (for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you), lest the anger of the LORD your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth**” (Deuteronomy 6:14-15).

God gave His prophet Isaiah the same message: “**I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images**” (Isaiah 42:8). The apostle Paul ascribed to himself a similar kind of jealousy when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth: “**I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ**” (2 Corinthians 11:2).

Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* concluded his presentation of the Ten Commandments with this threat and promise (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 354):

What then does God say about all these commandments? Answer:

God says the following: “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. Against those who hate me I visit the sin of the fathers on the children up to the third and fourth generation. But I do good to those who love me and keep my commandments to the thousandth generation.”

What is this? Answer:

God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore we are to fear his wrath and not disobey these commandments. However, God promises grace and every good thing to all those who keep these commandments. Therefore we also are to love and trust him and gladly act according to his commands.

This Conclusion to the Commandments contains two parts: God’s threat to punish the iniquity of those who hate Him, and God’s promise to show mercy to those who love Him. Luther’s explanation also speaks of two parts: God’s threat to punish sin and God’s promise of grace and blessing.

Let us look at some examples of how God has dealt with human sin in Bible history. Adam and Eve, the first sinners on earth, immediately became aware of their sin. They now had a bad conscience, a sense of shame, and a fear of God caused by their guilt. It is written: “**They knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden**” (Genesis 3:7-8). Adam explained their actions: “**I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself**” (Genesis 3:10).

God immediately told them plainly what the consequences of their sin would be. God said to Eve: “**I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you**” (Genesis 3:16). This was true not only for Eve, but for all her daughters. To Adam God said: “**Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread**” (Genesis 3:17-19). This was true not only for Adam, but for all his sons.

God had warned Adam and Eve in advance: “**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 2:17). God carried through on His threat, for as soon as they broke God’s command, their bodies became mortal, subject to death, and immediately they died spiritually, as their shame and fear indicate. Before sin came into the world, there was no death of any kind. But after their sin, God said to Adam: “**In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return**” (Genesis 3:19).

By the grace of God the fear and shame of Adam and Eve was transformed into joy when God gave them the first promise of a Savior (Genesis 3:15) and God created in their hearts a trust in that promise, as is evident from the fact that "**Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living**" (Genesis 3:20). Nevertheless, the consequences of their sin remained in effect, not only for Adam and Eve, but for all their offspring, even their godly offspring who were brought to faith in the promised Savior. With only two exceptions (Enoch and Elijah) temporal death has been God's judgment on human sin ever since that first sin. Because of their sinful flesh even believers in Christ must also endure earthly hardships and sorrows, even temporal death.

In the case of believers in Christ, however, we should not think of these hardships and sorrows as punishment for sin, but as scoldings and chastisements from a loving God, which He sends in order to accomplish specific spiritual objectives. We read: "**'Whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.' If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ... He (chastens us) for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it**" (Hebrews 12:6-11).

When the Christians in Corinth were partaking of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, the apostle Paul warned them: "**For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world**" (1 Corinthians 11:30-32). Notice that God's chastisement of these Christians was not punishment leading to hell, but an act of love on God's part to bring them to repentance.

God dealt with David's sin of lust, adultery, and murder by giving him a bad conscience, making him restless, bitter, and desperate, because he realized that God was angry with him. In that state of mind he wrote: "**There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. ... I groan because of the turmoil of my heart**" (Psalm 38:3, 8). But God was patient with David, sending him His prophet Nathan to bring him to repentance.

But in the case of those who turn away from God and hate Him and continue in their sin without repentance, God's judgments are indeed punishment for their sin. At various times in history God has punished those who hate Him with extraordinary calamities. We think of the great flood in the days of Noah, when "**all flesh died that moved on the earth: birds and cattle and beasts and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every man**" (Genesis 7:21). "**Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive**" (Genesis 7:23). Likewise, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was God's judgment on the sins of the residents of those towns. If there had been only ten righteous in those towns, the disaster would have been averted. But such was not the case, and "**the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens**" (Genesis 19:24).

Although God gave the leaders and residents of Jerusalem forty years to repent of their sin of crucifying their Messiah, God's judgment finally fell on them. Jesus knew that day was coming for Jerusalem, and so He "**wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you'**" (Luke 19:41-44). That judgment was so severe that Jesus said to His disciples: "**In those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be**" (Mark 13:19).

The prophet Isaiah wrote: "**The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked**" (Isaiah 57:20-21). Judas Iscariot is a good example of this; he recognized his sin and regretted having committed it, but in despair he took his own life (Matthew 27:3-5).

Sometimes God punishes sinners by letting them continue in their sins without doing anything. He is seemingly unconcerned and seemingly totally indifferent toward their continued sinning. This is actually a severe form of judgment, for such sinners tend to believe that they are getting away with their sins and that there is no God who will punish them. Asaph speaks for God when he says to the wicked: **“When you saw a thief, you consented with him, and have been a partaker with adulterers. You give your mouth to evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son. These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes”** (Psalm 50:18-21). Eventually judgment will come, and it will not be pleasant.

When sinners pay no attention to God, He seemingly pays no attention to them. Asaph says: **“My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels”** (Psalm 81:11-12). Through His prophet Amos God announced all kinds of judgments that God would bring on His wayward people in an effort to bring them to repentance. But when all of these failed to bring them to repentance, He announced one more judgment that is worse than all that came before: **“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east: they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it”** (Amos 8:11-12).

The heathen world persisted in its idolatry by worshiping creatures rather than the Creator, **“therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves. ... God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use of what is against nature, Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful. ... God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting”** (Romans 1:24-28). When the ancient Greeks and Romans openly practiced homosexual behavior – women with women and men with men – God allowed this to take place as a punishment for their idolatry.

In a similar way God allowed the Antichrist to emerge among the Christians and deceive many, because they no longer loved God’s truth, His Gospel of grace. The apostle Paul made this clear to the Thessalonians, writing: **“The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness”** (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12).

In some cases of obstinate resistance to God He may inflict the punishment known as the hardening of the heart. This is illustrated in the account of the Pharaoh of Egypt, who refused to let the children of Israel leave his land. First Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but then finally God hardened his heart, making it impossible for him to repent (Exodus chapters 5-11). It is written: **“The LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the children of Israel go out of his land”** (Exodus 11:10). See lessons 16.6 for more on this subject.

Jesus warned the scribes against committing the sin against the Holy Spirit. He said: **“Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation’ because they said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’”** (Mark 3:28-30). What happens in such cases is that God ends a person’s time of grace already in this life, making it impossible for them to repent of their sins and be brought to faith in Christ.

It is important for us to remember that it is not for us to determine if someone has hardened their heart or is guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit. It is right for us to warn against these possibilities, as Jesus and His apostles did, but we cannot read hearts, nor can we determine when God has

terminated a person's time of grace. Therefore, we should continue to use God's law and Gospel appropriately in our dealings with sinners, as we have opportunity.

Keep in mind that God's threats of punishment extend beyond this life. The punishment for sin must include the final and eternal punishment of everlasting separation from all of God's blessings, both earthly and heavenly. Jesus did not minimize in any way the awfulness of eternal punishment in hell. The death of the body is as nothing in comparison to the destruction of both body and soul in hell. Jesus said to His disciples: "**Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell**" (Matthew 10:28).

Jesus said more about hell than any of the prophets or apostles. Speaking of Judas Iscariot, His betrayer, Jesus said: "**Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had never been born**" (Mark 14:21). On another occasion He said: "**It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched**" (Mark 9:43-44). In His description of the final judgment Jesus spoke the words addressed to those going to hell: "**Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels**" (Matthew 25:41). "**These will go away into everlasting punishment**" (Matthew 25:46). In His story of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, Jesus explained that there is no escape from hell. Abraham in heaven says to the rich man in hell: "**Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us**" (Luke 16:26).

The apostle Paul described what will happen when Jesus returns on the last day. He will be "**revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power**" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

The apostle John described hell as "**the second death**" (Revelation 20:6). He said: "**The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever**" (Revelation 20:10). "**The cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death**" (Revelation 21:8).

When God gave the Ten Commandments, God also threatened to punish the iniquity of the fathers upon the children up to the third and fourth generations. The Old Testament provides several illustrations of this. When Noah's son Ham uncovered the nakedness of his father after Noah had drunk too much wine, Noah pronounced a curse on Ham's son Canaan, saying: "**Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren**" (Genesis 9:25). No doubt Canaan continued in the same attitude and behavior of his father, and so Ham's sin was punished in his son Canaan.

The sins of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel were punished not only by what happened to Ahab and Jezebel but also by what happened to their descendants. The servant of the prophet Elisha announced to commander Jehu: "**You shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge the blood of My servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD, at the hand of Jezebel. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish; and I will cut off from Ahab all the males in Israel, both bond and free**" (2 Kings 9:7-8). That is exactly what happened. "**Jehu killed all who remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, and all his great men and his close acquaintances and his priests, until he left him none remaining**" (2 Kings 10:11).

The sins of the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem had been continuing and increasing through the generations, until finally God's judgment fell on their descendants. It is written: "**The LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had**

compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy” (2 Chronicles 36:15-16). The sins of the fathers were punished in the judgment that came on their children.

Jesus Himself testified to His Jewish enemies: “**You are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation**” (Matthew 23:31-36). The children suffered greatly because of their fathers' sins.

In this connection we must remember, however, what the prophet Ezekiel taught: “**If, however, he (that is, a wicked man) begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, and considers but does not do likewise, ... he shall not die for the iniquity of his father; he shall surely live!**” (Ezekiel 18:14-18). Ezekiel also said: “**The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son**” (Ezekiel 18:20). In other words, the threatened judgment comes only on those who continue in the sins of their fathers.

The Jerusalem crowd that called for Jesus' crucifixion witnessed the action of Pontius Pilate washing his hands and saying foolishly: “**I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.**” How did they respond? They uttered the words: “**His blood be on us and our children**” (Matthew 27:24-25). Those children that continued in the ways of their fathers experienced the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, which Jesus predicted and said: “**Then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be**” (Matthew 24:21). But there were also those who paid attention to Jesus' warning and fled to the mountains at the right time designated by the Lord; they escaped the calamities and disasters taking place in Jerusalem. We read in the historical accounts that even many of the priests and some of the Pharisees turned to the Lord in those days.

The apostle Paul spoke of the judgment that fell upon the generation of the Jews who crucified Jesus and upon their descendants in these words: “**Wrath has come upon them to the uttermost**” (1 Thessalonians 2:16). But at the same time, Paul strove to bring his fellow-Jews to repentance, and he clearly taught: “**And they also (the Jewish people), if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again**” (Romans 11:23).

As believers in Jesus Christ, we should use these horrible threats of our God to frighten and beat down our sinful nature, to fend off the enticing voices of the unbelieving world, and to thrust Satan out of our way, whenever these enemies of our God try to mislead us into sin. The Lord certainly had a good reason for moving His prophets and apostles to include these threats and warnings in their writings. Listen to them again. “**Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?**” (1 Corinthians 6:9). “**Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (Galatians 5:21). “**Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience**” (Ephesians 5:6). “**My flesh trembles for fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments**” (Psalm 119:120).

The apostle Paul himself was well aware of the danger of falling away from the Lord. Therefore he wrote to the Corinthians: “**I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified**” (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Our Lutheran fathers confessed in the *Formula of Concord*: “*The old creature, like a stubborn, recalcitrant donkey, is also still a part of them (Christians), and it needs to be forced into obedience to*

Christ not only through the law's teaching, admonition, compulsion, and threat but also often with the cudgel of punishments and tribulations until the sinful flesh is completely stripped away and people are perfectly renewed in the resurrection" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 591).

Questions

1. Which words of threat and promise were spoken by the Lord after He spoke the First Commandment?
2. What does God mean when He calls Himself jealous?
3. What are the two parts of Martin Luther's Conclusion to the Commandments?
4. What was the immediate result of the sin of Adam and Eve?
5. In what ways did God's punishment of death fall on Adam and Eve?
6. What judgment came on David after He committed adultery and murder?
7. In what way is temporal death a punishment for sin?
8. How did Jesus compare temporal death with eternal death?
9. Give some examples of the way God punishes sin with His silence.
10. Why did God permit the ancient Greeks and Romans to wallow in homosexual sin?
11. Give some examples of God's punishment of children for the sins of their fathers.
12. How can a son avoid being punished for the sins of his ancestors?
13. What is meant by the second death?
14. How can we Christians of today us God's threats of punishment for sin?
15. What is the main purpose of God's law?