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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.11 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

God's Promise of Grace and Mercy

Because we are all sinners, we all deserve punishment. Because we are all sinners, no one among us deserves a reward of merit. This is true because the moral law of God demands perfection. The Lord said to the people through Moses: "**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). Jesus said the same thing to a lawyer who asked Him a question about eternal life. After the lawyer recited the first and second tables of the law, Jesus replied: "**Do this and you will live**" (Luke 10:28). The law of God promises the reward of eternal life to those, and only to those, who keep and do God's commandments perfectly, for the standard of God's law is holiness and perfection, even as God Himself is holy and perfect. Transgression of a single commandment means that the transgressor deserves nothing but condemnation. For it is written: "**Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law**" (Deuteronomy 27:26). The apostle Paul repeated this same teaching in his letter to the Galatians: "**Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things things which are written in the book of the law, to do them**" (Galatians 3:10).

If there were someone who could keep God's law as it should be kept, God would then reward that person with eternal life, for that person would have earned or deserved eternal life. But the fact is that we are all sinners; there is no one to whom God owes eternal life. For this reason, David prayed to the Lord: "**Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous**" (Psalm 143:2). The prophet Isaiah declared of himself and all others: "**We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags**" (Isaiah 64:6). The first section of Paul's letter to the Romans establishes this point by many proofs and examples: "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23). Jesus' brother James is in perfect agreement, saying: "**Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all**" (James 2:10).

Therefore, when God talked about "**showing mercy to thousands (of generations), to those who love Me and keep My commandments**" (Exodus 20:6), He was not talking about giving people what they deserve. He was not saying that these people deserve His blessings. He was telling them that He would show mercy to those sinners who would even begin to keep His commandments out of love for Him. The only reason that they would love Him and begin to keep His commandments is that the Holy Spirit through the Gospel promise had convinced them that God loved them and would keep His promise to send them a Savior. In this way we sinners have the assurance that God will bless and show mercy to us sinners who trust in His mercy and who begin to keep His commandments out of love for Him who loved us first. When we find that God is showing mercy to us and blessing us in various ways, we need to say the same thing that Jacob said: "**I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant**" (Genesis 32:10).

God does not delight in punishing sinners. God delights in showing mercy to those who recognize their sins and trust in His promises of salvation and begin to obey His commandments. God gives them much more in His mercy than the forgiveness of their sins and the promise of eternal life. He blesses them also in this life, as He assures us over and over again in His Word. Listen to Moses' words to God's people as they were about to enter the promised land of Canaan: "**Your eyes have seen every great act of the LORD which He did. Therefore you shall keep every commandment which I command you**

today. ... The land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven, a land for which the LORD your God cares; the eyes of the LORD your God are always on it. ... If you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, ... and I will send grass in your fields for your livestock. ... Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey" (Deuteronomy 11:7-28).

This same theme is repeated throughout the pages of Scripture. Psalm 103:8-18: "The LORD is merciful and gracious. ... He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. ... As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. ... The mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them."

Psalm 112:1-2: "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; the generation of the upright will be blessed." Remember: God blesses to a thousand generations, not just three or four.

Psalm 147:11-14: "The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy. ... For He has strengthened the bars of your gates; He has blessed your children within you. He makes peace in your borders, and fills you with the finest wheat."

Isaiah 66:2: "On this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."

1 John 4:19 – 5:2: "We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ... By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." Notice how God's love for us in promising and sending a Savior moves us to love Him in return, and in this love for Him we begin to keep His commandments with joyful hearts and begin to show love to those around us. It is to such as these that God promises all kinds of blessings, both temporal and eternal. Just as parents show their delight in the very first steps of their children and give them little gifts in order to encourage them, so also our heavenly Father blesses His children to encourage them as they begin to show their love for Him.

Luther's *Small Catechism* summarizes these blessings like this: "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" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 354). We can expect such blessings from God, not because we deserve them, but because God has promised to give them to us.

The history of Israel reveals how God blessed His Old Testament people when they repented of their sins, turned to God for mercy, and began to show their love for God by how they lived. Moses said to them: "He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land. ... You shall be blessed above all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:13-14). "All these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 28:2). "No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11). "Let your heart keep My commands; for length of days and long life and peace they will add to you" (Proverbs 3:1-2). "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this, ... if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:10).

Jesus also promised earthly blessings to His followers. He said: “**Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you**” (Matthew 6:33). By “**these things**” He meant the necessities of life such as food and clothing. On another occasion Jesus said to His disciples: “**There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the Gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time - houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions**” (Mark 10:29-30). Those who follow Jesus may have to give up a lot, but God will take care of their needs. They will become part of His large family of believers, and even though they will be persecuted for their faith in Him, He will be with them in all things. In this same spirit the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians: “**My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus**” (Philippians 4:19).

The greatest blessings that God promises to His children are the eternal blessings. Jesus said to His disciples: “**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven**” (Matthew 5:10-12). Jesus said: “**You will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved**” (Matthew 10:22). In the same address Jesus said: “**Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven**” (Matthew 10:32).

Jesus did not promise that following Him would be easy. Even as Jesus’ life was not easy and He had to bear a cross, so His followers must bear their own crosses. But an eternal blessing awaits them. Jesus said: “**If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ... For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then he will reward each according to his works**” (Matthew 16:24-27). Jesus assured His apostles: “**Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel**” (Matthew 19:28). Jesus concluded His parable of the tares in the wheat with this amazing promise: “**Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father**” (Matthew 13:43). Jesus also spoke these words that John heard Him say in the visions he saw and heard: “**Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life**” (Revelation 2:10).

Note that when Jesus uses the word “**reward**” in these promises, He does not mean a reward that we deserve or that we have earned or merited. The rewards that God gives are always rewards of grace. Our Lutheran confessions say: “*Scripture calls eternal life a reward, not because it is owed on account of works. ... Eternal life is called a reward because it is owed to the justified on account of the promise*” (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 171).

God promises to bless believers who love Him and begin to keep His commandments, even to a thousand generations: “**He keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments**” (Deuteronomy 7:9). Think of the blessings God gave to the children of Israel for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, even though those patriarchs had been gone for hundreds of years. For Moses said: “**The LORD drives these nations out from before you, that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**” (Deuteronomy 9:5). Think of the blessings that came to David’s descendants in the kingdom of Judah long after David’s death. It is written: “**Jehoram did evil in the sight of the LORD. Yet the LORD would not destroy the house of David, because of the covenant He had made with David, and since He had promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever**” (2 Chronicles 21:6-7). Jesus’ mother Mary sang: “**His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation**” (Luke 1:50).

As we go through life with its many temptations and reverses, we need these promises of blessing to keep us on the right path. The apostle Paul encouraged the Galatians by saying: “**He who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart**” (Galatians 6:8-9). Some of the Jewish Christians were in danger of turning away from Christ and returning to a Jewish faith that did not acknowledge that

Jesus was the promised Messiah. For this reason, the author of the letter to the Hebrews encouraged them with these words: **“Do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that, after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise”** (Hebrews 10:35-36). **“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”** (Hebrews 12:1-2).

But let us never get the idea that we have all these blessings coming to us because of our own merits or efforts. It is by God's grace alone that these blessings are ours. Jesus said: **“When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’”** (Luke 17:10).

Questions

1. How would we have to live in order to deserve a reward from God?
2. How many persons deserve such a reward from God?
3. What proof do you have for your answer to question 2?
4. What does God delight in doing for those who love Him?
5. Where does our love for God come from?
6. What are some of the earthly blessings God promised to His people?
7. What must we say about all the blessings that God gives to us?
8. What blessings did Jesus promise to His disciples?
9. In what sense does Jesus use the word “reward”?
10. In what way are children blessed by the obedience of their ancestors?
11. What eternal blessings does Jesus promise to His disciples?