



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.12.2 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

God's Law as a Mirror to Show Us Our Sin

The chief purpose of God's law is to show us our sins. This is stated specifically by the apostle Paul, who wrote to the Romans: "**By the law is the knowledge of sin**" (Romans 3:20). And again: "**The law entered that the offense might abound**" (Romans 5:20). Paul admitted that this was true of himself also. He confessed: "**I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet'**" (Romans 7:7). Thus, the chief purpose of the law is as a mirror to show us what we are like. A glass mirror shows us what we look like externally. The law is a mirror that shows us what we look like to God internally.

As we have seen, God's law demands of us perfect love towards God and man, that is, holiness and perfection in thought, word, and deed. God's law demands perfect performance from us. One broken link in the chain of obedience means that our performance rating from God is zero. There are some who say that God would not give us commandments that are impossible for us to keep. But such persons misunderstand the purpose of God's law. God's law tells each human being what he should do, not what he can do or does do.

God's Word clearly teaches us that there is no one who obeys the law as it ought to be obeyed. That is why we read such statements as these in the holy Scriptures: "**There is none who does good, no, not one**" (Psalm 14:3). "**There is not a just man on earth who does good, and does not sin**" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23).

This is true not only of unbelievers, but of believers in Christ as well. Even true believers in Christ cannot keep God's law as it should be kept, for they still sin every day of their lives. That is why Jesus taught His followers to pray: "**Forgive us our sins**" (Luke 11:4). That is why the apostle John reminded his readers: "**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him (God) a liar, and His word is not in us**" (1 John 1:8-10). That is why David prayed: "**Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous**" (Psalm 143:2). That is why the apostle Paul wrote: "**With the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin**" (Romans 7:25). The new man in Paul was perfectly obedient, but at the same time he still had his sinful flesh, and that is why he kept on sinning. For this same reason Paul admitted: "**Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected, but I press on**" (Philippians 3:12).

If we want to know what God thinks of sin – how much He hates sin, and how He must punish sin in His holy justice, all we have to do is look at what happened to our Lord Jesus on the cross. The prophet Isaiah foretold what happened: "**The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all**" (Isaiah 53:6). Since Jesus was bearing the sin of the world, God's judgment fell on Him with the full force of His wrath against human sin. He was "**stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed**" (Isaiah 53:4-5). We see at the cross of Christ what happens when the full weight of God's law and the punishment for its disobedience comes down on human sin. God "**did not spare His Son, but delivered Him up for us all**" (Romans 8:32). Christ became "**a curse for us**" (Galatians 3:13).

The most horrible abuse of God's law is to think that we can keep it and earn God's favor by keeping it. Such a view makes Jesus' sacrifice on the cross totally unnecessary. "**If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain**" (Galatians 2:21). If we can keep God's law and earn God's favor, we do not need a Savior at all. Such persons need to have God's law hammered into them until they have to admit that they have sinned and need a Savior. They need a Savior because without such a Savior their final destiny will be eternal punishment.

The Pharisees at Jesus' time had a high opinion of themselves and therefore did not want to confess that they were sinners. That is why, out of love for them, Jesus kept on calling attention to their sins. He kept on preaching God's law to them in order to humble them. He wanted them to look at the mirror of God's law and see how sinful they were.

In the presence of the Pharisees Jesus once said: "**For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind**" (John 9:39). By those who see, Jesus meant those who think they see, like the Pharisees. The account continues: "**Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, 'Are we blind also? Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, "We see." Therefore your sin remains'**" (John 9:40-41). If the Pharisees would only admit they were blind, then Jesus could give them sight. But since they thought they could see, Jesus could not help them. Thus, if sinners admit that they are sinners, then their sins can be forgiven. But as long as they think they are without sin, there can be no forgiveness for them. From this incident we can see the extreme importance of God's law. The law knocks down proud sinners, so that Jesus can lift them up and save them through His message of the forgiveness of sins – the forgiveness of sins which He won for all by being punished for the sins of all on the cross.

But there are so many who do not use the law as it is intended. In the United States and other countries there are organizations for youth, known as Scouts. The twelfth Scout Law declares: "A Scout is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties." Do you see what is wrong with that statement? The Scout is saying something that is not true and cannot be true. He is saying that he is faithful in his duties to God, but that is a lie. God's law says that no one is faithful in his duties to God or to his fellowman. Thus, the Scout, if he means what he says, is among those who say: "**We see.**" And therefore his sin remains.

Here is another example. One of the Roman Catholic manuals used for instruction of junior high students makes this statement: "If on earth we have obeyed the commandments of God and of the Church, we shall be given an eternal reward in heaven. ... The Ten Commandments of God state the minimum requirements for salvation" (*My Catholic Faith*). Those who teach this do not understand God's law at all and do not know why God has given us His law.

But there are some Lutherans also who do not understand the law. *The Lutheran*, a magazine for one branch of Lutheranism in America, gave this wrong answer to a question posed by a reader in its issue of August 11, 1976: "Question: How do we inherit eternal life? Is belief in Christ enough, or must we be baptized and do good works?" The magazine answered, in part: "Briefly stated, we inherit eternal life through faith in Christ and through obedience to His commands." In other words, Christ is our Savior. We are saved by faith in Him. But we also save ourselves by our obedience to His commands. But this is what the Bible says: "**We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law**" (Romans 3:28). The Bible says: "**You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace**" (Galatians 5:4). The law's purpose is not to save us by our obedience to it. That is impossible. The law's purpose is not to save us, but to show us our sins and our total inability to save ourselves by our obedience.

Jesus told a parable "**to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others**" (Luke 18:9). They used the law to condemn others, but they failed to apply it to themselves. They did not realize that the chief purpose of the law was to reveal their own sin, as well as the sins of others.

This is the parable: “**Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”** (Luke 18:10-14).

The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable used God’s law to condemn others but did not apply God’s law to his own sins of pride and lovelessness. His hope for eternal life was his own obedience and piety. He did not understand God’s truth: “**By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight**” (Romans 3:20). The tax collector, on the other hand, recognized that he was a sinner, and that his only hope was God’s forgiveness through an atoning sacrifice. This man went home with his sins forgiven, but not the Pharisee, who did not even recognize that he had any sins.

Jesus was once asked by a rich young ruler what he could do to inherit eternal life. Jesus directed him to the Ten Commandments to make him realize he could not save himself. But the young man said: “**All these things I have kept from my youth**” (Luke 18:21). He did not understand the chief purpose of God’s law either. He did not take a careful look at God’s mirror. But then Jesus pointed out to him that he had not even kept the First Commandment, for when Jesus said that he should sell his possessions and give them to the poor, he became sorrowful. To put God above his possessions was too difficult for that man to do.

Jesus once said: “**Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick**” (Luke 5:31). The chief purpose of God’s Law is to show us that we are not well. The law shows us that we are sick, and we need the only Physician who can truly help us, Jesus Christ. Martin Luther once said: “It is God’s nature to make something out of nothing; hence one who is not yet nothing, out of him God cannot make anything. ... God accepts only the forsaken, cures only the sick, gives sight only to the blind, restores life only to the dead, sanctifies only the sinners, gives wisdom only to the unwise. In short, He has mercy only on those who are wretched” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 14, p. 163). The purpose of God’s law is to make us realize we are the forsaken, the sick, the blind, the dead, the sinners, the unwise, the wretched, that we are really nothing at all, so that He can through the Gospel make something of us.

Questions

1. What do we mean when we say that God’s law is like a mirror?
2. Where do we read in the Bible that the law shows us our sin?
3. What does God’s law demand of every one of us?
4. How does Jesus show in the Lord’s Prayer that believers are sinners?
5. How does the cross reveal God’s hatred for sin?
6. What is the worst misuse of God’s law? Why is this so bad?
7. How are Scouts taught a wrong use of the law?
8. What is wrong with the teaching of *My Catholic Faith*?
9. In what way is the answer given in the magazine *The Lutheran* contrary to Scripture?
10. How does Jesus’ parable of the two praying men apply to you?
11. How did the rich young ruler misuse God’s law?
12. Explain what Jesus meant when He spoke the words of John 9:40-41.