



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.12.3 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

God's Law as a Fixed Standard to Teach Us Which Works Are Pleasing to God

The first two uses of the law are intended for both unbelievers and believers in Christ. If believers were made up only of the new man without the old man of sinful flesh, they would not need the law at all, since, as the apostle Paul says, **“the law is not made for a righteous person”** (1 Timothy 1:9). But the Christian is made up of new man and old man. It is because of the sinful flesh that Christians need the law to curb their sinful flesh and also to remind them continually of their sin. The Lutheran confessions state: “The law always accuses”. That is true also of the Christian. The law always finds fault with every sinner, and none of us is without sin. Because of our sinful flesh, we all need the law to curb our flesh and to show us our sin.

In addition, all of us Christians need the law also in its third use: to inform and instruct us as to what kind of works we can do to please our God, what works are in accordance with His will. The third use of the law is as a fixed standard or rule, teaching us which works please God and which works displease God. God uses His law to accomplish all three purposes simultaneously. Day by day, God's law continues to humble us as it reminds us of our sin. Day by day, God's law continues to curb the lusts of our flesh. Day by day, God's law continues to point out which works we can do that are God-pleasing. God's law does not supply the motivation for doing what is God-pleasing, however. The motivation to do what pleases God comes from the Gospel, the Good News of what God has done for us in Christ. The apostle John said it as simply as it can be said: **“We love Him because He first loved us”** (1 John 4:19).

The moment we are brought to faith in Christ as our Savior from sin, we are no longer under the law so that it condemns, curses us, and threatens us with eternal hell. **“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 8:1). We are no longer under the law in the sense that we must keep the law in order to gain God's favor and save ourselves. Since we have perfect righteousness and forgiveness in Christ, the law cannot add anything to our salvation. That is why the apostle Paul tells us Christians that we are no longer under the law but under grace. **“You are not under law but under grace”** (Romans 6:14).

Because we are under grace and know our sins are forgiven because of Christ, we love God and want to please Him in everything that we do. But because of our sinful flesh, we can be misled to believe that certain things are God-pleasing when they are not, and that certain things are not God-pleasing when they are. Besides that, there are some activities that are *adiaphora*, neither good nor bad in themselves, but can be good or bad depending on the circumstances. Because of our sinful flesh we need instruction on all these matters, and God's law in its third use provides such instruction. For this reason, Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: *“Here then we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 428).

The longest psalm in the Bible is Psalm 119. Throughout this psalm we have references to God's commandments giving us guidance for our daily lives, for we, as believers, truly want to please our God by our lives. For example, it is written: **“How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought you; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You”** (Psalm 119:9-10).

11). Again we read: **“How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”** (Psalm 119:103-105).

The apostle Paul said of himself: **“I delight in the law of God according to the inward man”** (Romans 7:22). Paul wanted to do the right things according to God’s will in every way, but he found that his sinful flesh hindered him. All of us Christians have the same problem. According to our new man, we want to please God in everything we do. But our sinful flesh hinders us not only in our doing what is right, but also in our understanding of what is right. That is one reason why we need God’s Word as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.

Think of the Christians in Colosse. They had been brought to faith in Christ. They wanted to serve the Lord. But because of their flesh they were in danger of giving in to false teachers who taught them that the best way to serve God and please Him was to follow some of the Old Testament ceremonial laws that were no longer in effect. They were being misled into thinking that the best way to serve God was through worshiping angels and subjecting themselves to all kinds of rules about eating and drinking. So Paul wrote to them: **“Why ... do you subject yourselves to regulations, ... 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). **“Self-imposed religion”** is not the way to please God. We please God by listening to and following God’s instructions for how we should live, not our own ideas or the whim of some false teacher.

The concluding portions of almost all of Paul’s New Testament letters contain instructions for godly living, in accordance with the Gospel. His converts needed such instruction, because of their heathen surroundings and their heathen background, and also because their sinful flesh might lead them down a wrong path. They loved their Savior and they wanted to please Him, so Paul gave them instruction as to how they could do this. For example, the letter to the Romans is a letter of doctrine. It talks in great detail first about God’s law and then His Gospel, but beginning in chapter 12 and to the end of the letter Paul shows the kinds of things that God wants us to do out of love for Him. He says: **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”** (Romans 12:2). In this connection Paul repeats the Ten Commandments in Romans 13:9.

But we must always be careful that we do not let that our following the Lord’s instructions contribute anything to our hope of salvation. We have been judged as holy by God through our faith in Christ and the total forgiveness He won for us. But because we are totally forgiven by God’s grace, we want to obey our Lord and please Him in every way. The apostle Peter wrote: **“Rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct”** (1 Peter 1:13-15).

Through the centuries the Roman Catholic Church had devised various ways in which they hoped to please God. But many of these ways were self-imposed regulations that had no basis in God’s Word. For example, religious crusades to the Holy Land, pilgrimages to shrines, vows of chastity and poverty, the use of rosaries, and prayers to the saints have been presented as acts that are especially well-pleasing to God. Some of these activities were even presented as being necessary for salvation. In fact, some of these activities were considered so holy that those who performed them had superfluous (extra) obedience that the church could then sell to others. In other words, they devised their own categories of good works that were even better than obedience to God’s commandments. Martin Luther and the other reformers did their best to instruct the people what were truly good works in the sight of God. What did they use as their guide for what was pleasing to God? God’s moral law as revealed in the Bible, particularly in the Ten Commandments. The *Large Catechism* of Luther says:

“Apart from these Ten Commandments no action or life can be good or pleasing to God, no matter how great or precious it may be in the eyes of the world” (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 428).

In more recent times teachers have arisen that have misused God’s Word that say that love is the fulfillment of the law. Based on this, they argue that any action is good as long as it is done with love. One man named Joseph Fletcher said: “I am prepared to argue that a Christian obligation calls for lies and adultery and fornication and theft and promise-breaking and killing, sometimes, depending on the situation.” This philosophy is called situation ethics. This philosophy does not accept God’s law as a fixed standard for godly behavior, a standard that does not change. But God’s law is a fixed standard. In other words, fornication is always sinful, regardless of the situation or circumstance. Theft is always sinful, regardless of the situation or circumstance.

In general, there are two opposite ways in which Christians can be led astray from the correct teaching concerning the law of God. One way is called *antinomianism*, that is, teaching that Christians do not need the law. Teachers and preachers who follow this view say they preach only the Gospel of Christ and not the law. But we cannot appreciate the good news of the Gospel if we are not constantly reminded of our sins by the teaching of the law. When antinomianism begins to hold sway in a church, then law is not used in any of its uses. The confession of sins is done away with, and the people are told only good things about themselves. The result is pride and a lack of church discipline and a lack of training in godliness. When church bodies permit their pastors to be active homosexuals, as is the case in many places today, we can see that antinomianism has taken hold and God’s law has been tossed aside as obsolete. We need to remember the words of the apostle Paul: **“Do not be deceived. God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap”** (Galatians 6:7).

The second way in which God’s law is commonly misused is *legalism*. Legalism is the attempt to accomplish by means of the law what only the Gospel of Christ can accomplish. What is the only way of salvation? It is the Gospel only, not the law. If anyone thinks he can save himself by keeping the law or even contributing to his salvation by keeping the law, he is guilty of legalism. The law’s contribution to our salvation is only negative. That is, the law shows us our sin and our need for the Gospel. The law of God is not a means of grace. The law shows us what is right and wrong, but it does not motivate us to do good with the right spirit or attitude. Legalism attempts to bring about positive change and an improvement in morals apart from the Gospel. Legalism stresses outward conformity to a certain pattern of behavior, but it cannot change the heart. Only the Gospel is a means of grace, able to impart righteousness and life, as it is written: **“The letter (law) kills, but the Spirit gives life”** (2 Corinthians 3:6). The apostle Paul wrote: **“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes”** (Romans 1:16).

Our Lutheran fathers were forced by the presence of many false teachers to study the uses of the law very carefully. In fact, the *Formula of Concord* devotes an entire article to the third use of the law. Here is a brief excerpt from Article VI: *“The law indeed says that it is God’s will and command that we walk in new life. However, it does not give the power and ability to begin or to carry out this command. Instead, the Holy Spirit, who is given and received not through the law but through the proclamation of the gospel, renews the heart. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit uses the law to instruct the reborn and to show and demonstrate to them in the Ten Commandments what is the acceptable will of God”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 589).

Questions

1. Why do believers in Christ still need the law?
2. What is the third use of the law?
3. What does it mean that we are under grace, not under law?
4. Why can the law not motivate God-pleasing behavior?
5. Which commandments of men were the Colossians in danger of obeying?
6. What is meant by self-imposed religion? Why is it wrong?
7. Why must we rule out the law altogether as a means of salvation?
8. What are some of the works the Roman Catholics praised as being really good?
9. What is wrong with the teaching of Joseph Fletcher?
10. Give a definition and example of antinomianism.
11. Give a definition and example of legalism.
12. How does the Holy Spirit use the law in its third use?