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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.8 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

Applying the Law and the Gospel

In theory it is not so difficult to distinguish between the law and the Gospel. But in our daily lives it is not always so easy to know when to apply the law to ourselves and others, and when to apply the Gospel to ourselves and others. Someone has come up with the saying: The comfortable need to be afflicted with the law, and the afflicted need to be comforted by the Gospel. But what happens very often is that the haughty, smug, and comfortable sinners comfort themselves with the Gospel, not realizing that what they need is the law to show them how sinful they are. On the other hand, the deeply troubled, afflicted, and terror-stricken sinners apply the law to themselves and make themselves even more terror-stricken, when what they actually need is the Good News that Jesus has taken away their sins and God forgives them. Applying the law and Gospel to others means that we need to assess what their spiritual condition is so that we can determine whether they need to hear the law or the Gospel. In other words, we need to determine whether they are haughty, smug, and comfortable, or whether they are troubled, afflicted, and terror-stricken.

Let us look at a few examples from the Scriptures. In 2 Samuel chapter 11, we hear of the great sin of King David, when he first lusted after his neighbor's wife, then committed adultery with her, then tried to cover up his sin by having her husband come home from battle so that he might spend time with his wife, and when that failed, he gave the orders that her husband should be put into danger so that he would be killed by the enemy. Then he married the widow who was pregnant with his child. There was no repentance on his part. He remained king and no doubt pretended that all was well.

Did God then send His prophet Nathan to David to comfort him with the Gospel that his sins were forgiven? That was Nathan's ultimate aim, as it always is, to comfort sinners with the Gospel of the Savior. But when the prophet Nathan visited David, he confronted him with the law. He showed him his sin, and he did it in a roundabout way by telling him a story about a rich man who stole his poor neighbor's lamb. In righteous wrath King David said that this rich man should die, and then Nathan proclaimed the law to David in strong language: **"You are the man. ... Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife"** (2 Samuel 12:7-9). In addition, Nathan told David all the calamities that would surely come to him and to his family because of his sins. He had committed adultery and murder. Members of his own family would commit adultery and murder, and it would not be secret. God said through His prophet Nathan: **"You did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun"** (2 Samuel 12:12).

At that point in his life David needed the law as a mirror to show him his sin, and the prophet Nathan used the law to show him his sin. But when David responded by saying: **"I have sinned against the LORD"**, Nathan had a different word for him. He now brought him the Gospel, because now David was a troubled and afflicted sinner. Nathan said to David: **"The LORD also has put away your sin: you shall not die"** (2 Samuel 12:13). The law is necessary to lead comfortable sinners to repentance. But once that goal has been achieved, it is time for the comforting words of the Gospel of forgiveness. If David had tried to defend himself, Nathan would have had to continue with the law until David broke down and repented. The sincerity of David's repentance in this case is revealed by Psalm 51, which he wrote during this time, and perhaps also by Psalm 32 and Psalm 38.

We shall mention a few other examples. After God spoke the law to the children of Israel on Mt. Sinai, they were well aware of their sin and trembled in fear. God then through Moses promised the coming of the Savior, the great Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:18). When the prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming of the Anointed One, the Christ, he said He would **“preach good tidings to the poor”**, He would **“heal the brokenhearted”**, He would **“proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound”**, and He would **“comfort all who mourn”** (Isaiah 61:1-2). When Jesus came, He spoke such good news and invited the people: **“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”** (Matthew 11:28).

But did Jesus comfort the smug and self-secure Pharisees with the Gospel? Not at all. He said to them: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness”** (Matthew 23:27). Jesus even confronted the mild-mannered Pharisee Nicodemus with the law, opening His conversation with him by saying: **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (John 3:3). When Jesus conversed with the Samaritan woman at the well, he did not say: **“Woe to you”**, but He did say: **“You have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband”** (John 4:18). Jesus knew men’s hearts, and so He knew the inward condition of those to whom He spoke. We, on the other hand, have to make our judgments based on what we see and hear, and no doubt there will be times when we misjudge the situation. But even then, God can use our mistakes in judgment and bring about a good conclusion.

Sometimes the same question can be given a different answer, depending on the spiritual condition of the person asking the question. When a ruler among the Jews asked Jesus: **“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”** (Luke 18:18), Jesus responded by directing him to the law. But when the jailer of Philippi asked Paul and Silas a similar question: **“What must I do to be saved?”** (Acts 16:30), they responded by giving him the Gospel: **“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved”** (Acts 16:31). In each case the response was what the individual needed at the time. In one case the answer was law, and in the other case the answer was Gospel.

In a congregation of Christians there are times when the binding key is to be used, and there are times when the loosing key is to be used. The congregation at Corinth needed to be instructed on these matters. One of their members was living with his father’s wife. This was a case of open adultery. But the congregation did not do anything about this matter. In fact, it seems that the congregation was **“puffed up”** (1 Corinthians 5:2) rather than in a state of mourning because of this sin. Perhaps they had the mistaken idea that the Gospel of forgiveness of sins allowed for such behavior among Christians. Therefore Paul instructed them that it was time for the law to be applied to this impenitent sinner. He said to them: **“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good”** (1 Corinthians 5:4-6). Excommunication is a verdict of the law: There is no salvation for an impenitent sinner. **“Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person”** (1 Corinthians 5:13).

When the congregation at Corinth then carried out this excommunication, the guilty man recognized his sin and was burdened with shame and sorrow. The congregation needed instruction again as to what to do. Paul responded: **“This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. ... Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sake in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices”** (2 Corinthians 2:6-11). Now that the person was sorrowful about his sinful behavior, it was no longer the time to apply the law, but it was time to announce to him the Gospel of comfort and to forgive him his sins in the name of the Savior. Satan, however, wants the exact opposite. He wants the impenitent sinners to continue being falsely comforted with the Gospel, and he wants the troubled sinners to be tormented with the law.

Notice that the aim in dealing with sinners of whatever kind is to bring them to repentance and faith in Christ, so that they may inherit eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Nathan wasted no time in bringing the Gospel to David, as soon as he sensed that David was repentant. So also we should be eager to share the Gospel with others, when there is a clear indication of repentance. We are always striving for the goal of having God's last Word, the Gospel, swallow up the preliminary Word of the law.

We are ministers of the new covenant, not the old covenant. We need the spirit and love of the Good Shepherd, who spoke through the prophet Ezekiel: "**I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment**" (Ezekiel 34:16).

The most difficult part of an undershepherd's work is to apply law and Gospel properly. We need to judge matters according to the evidence, and it may take some time and discussion between the pastor and his member to come to a definite decision as to whether the law or the Gospel is needed. Jesus said: "**A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks**" (Luke 6:45). Our decision must be based on what we see and hear. Jesus said: "**Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?**" (Luke 12:42).

Questions

1. How can we determine in a specific situation whether to speak law or Gospel?
2. How did Nathan deal with the sin of King David?
3. Under what circumstances did Jesus preach the law to sinners?
4. Under what circumstances did Jesus preach the Gospel to sinners?
5. Why did Jesus answer a question in one way, and Paul answered a similar question in a different way?
6. How did the congregation at Corinth initially respond to a situation of an open sin?
7. What did Paul instruct the Corinthians to do?
8. Why did Paul give them different instructions later on?
9. What is the ultimate aim of the Good Shepherd?
10. What is the ultimate aim of undershepherds or pastors?
11. What is the most difficult task for the pastor? Why is this so?
12. Which teaching is most likely to be misused in your locale, the law or the Gospel?